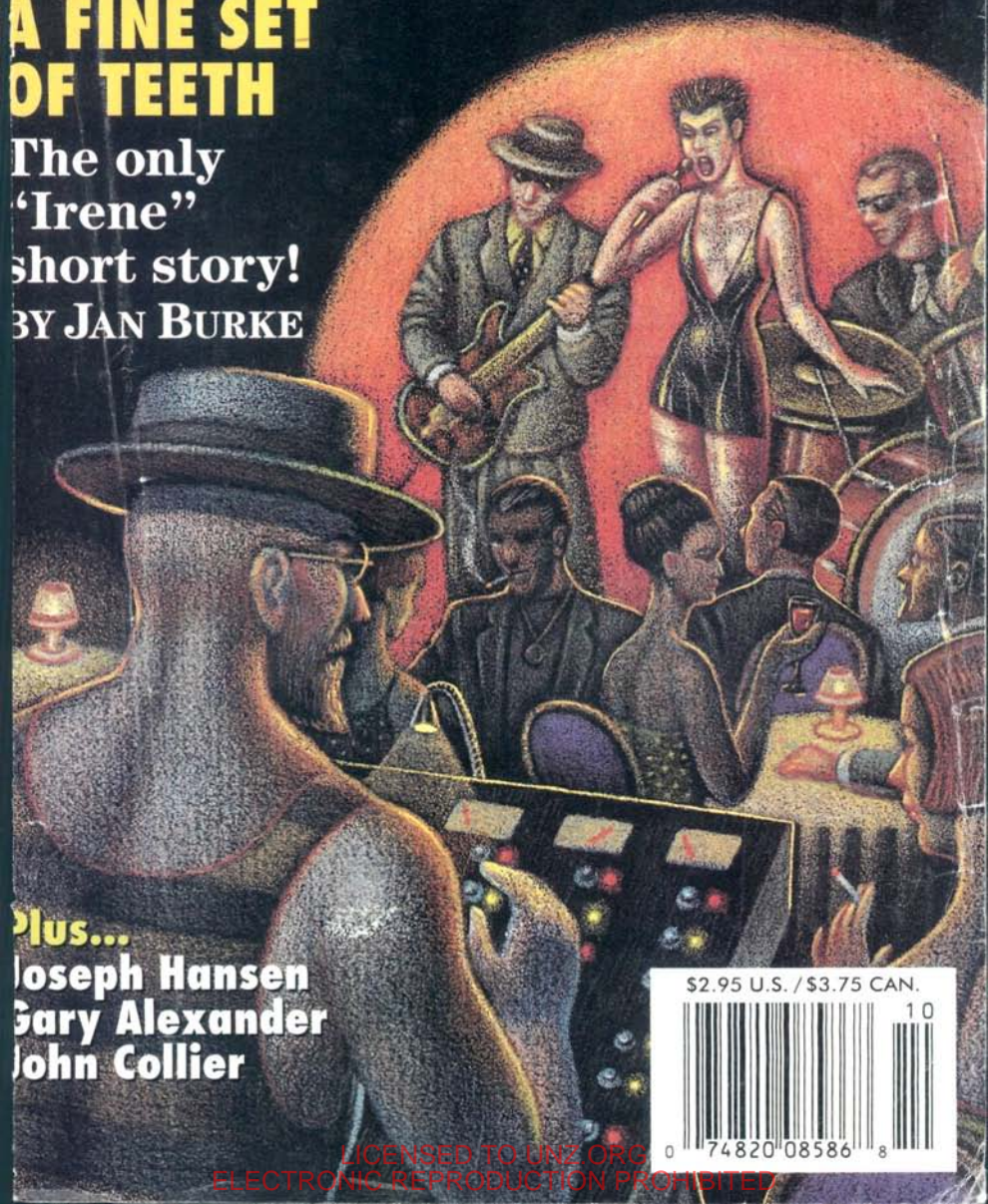


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OCTOBER 1998

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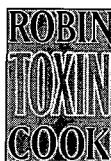
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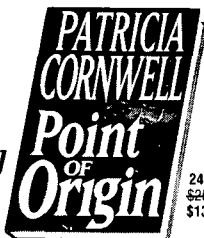


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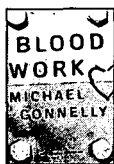


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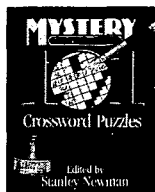


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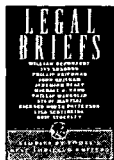
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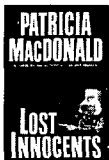
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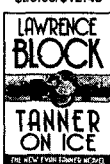
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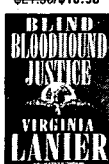
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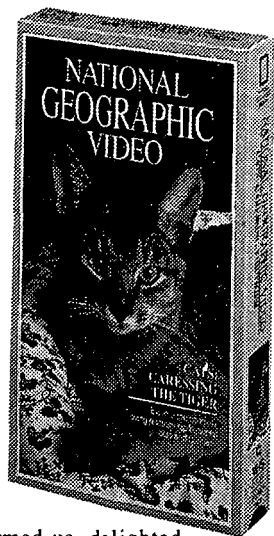
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

Jan Burke's latest novel, *Liar* ("immediately gripping," says *Publishers Weekly*; "dryly comic . . . meticulously plotted . . . a strong cast of fully realized characters"), published by Simon & Schuster in May, brings us a new investigation by reporter Irene Kelly (assisted as always by her husband Frank Harriman, a homicide detective). *Goodnight, Irene* launched the series in 1993 and was followed by *Sweet Dreams, Irene*; *Dear Irene*; *Remember Me, Irene*; and *Hocus*.

Now we are delighted to be able to bring you the only existing "Irene" short story, "A Fine Set of Teeth." Last year a slightly different version made a prior appearance in a limited collector's edition and on a limited edition audiotape, both produced by A.S.A.P. Publishing, but this is its first general publication.

The audiotape, by the way, contains music by the author's musician husband. "Tim read the story," she tells us, "and immedi-

ately went out to his studio and composed an instrumental piece based on what he 'heard' in the story—for me, a great compliment."

We hope that Ms. Burke will pass along to us further short Irene adventures. (Our readers will recall her previous non-Irene stories in AHMM, most recently "White Trash" in October 1996.)

Russell William Asplund, author of "The Rabbi and the Sorcerer," his first mystery short story, is the author of three other stories, which appeared in *Writers of the Future XII* (Mr. Asplund was the first place winner in a Writers of the Future contest), *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*. He is a computer programmer in his day job, lives in Vermont, attended Brigham Young University, is married and has four children, and has "been writing for as long as I've been reading." "The Rabbi and the Sorcerer" is a charmer.

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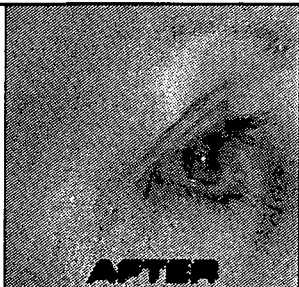
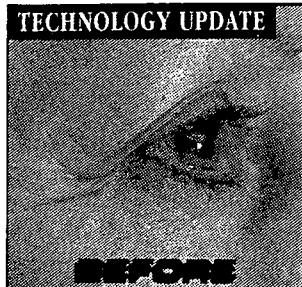
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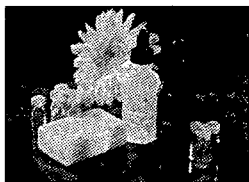
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by Erica Williams



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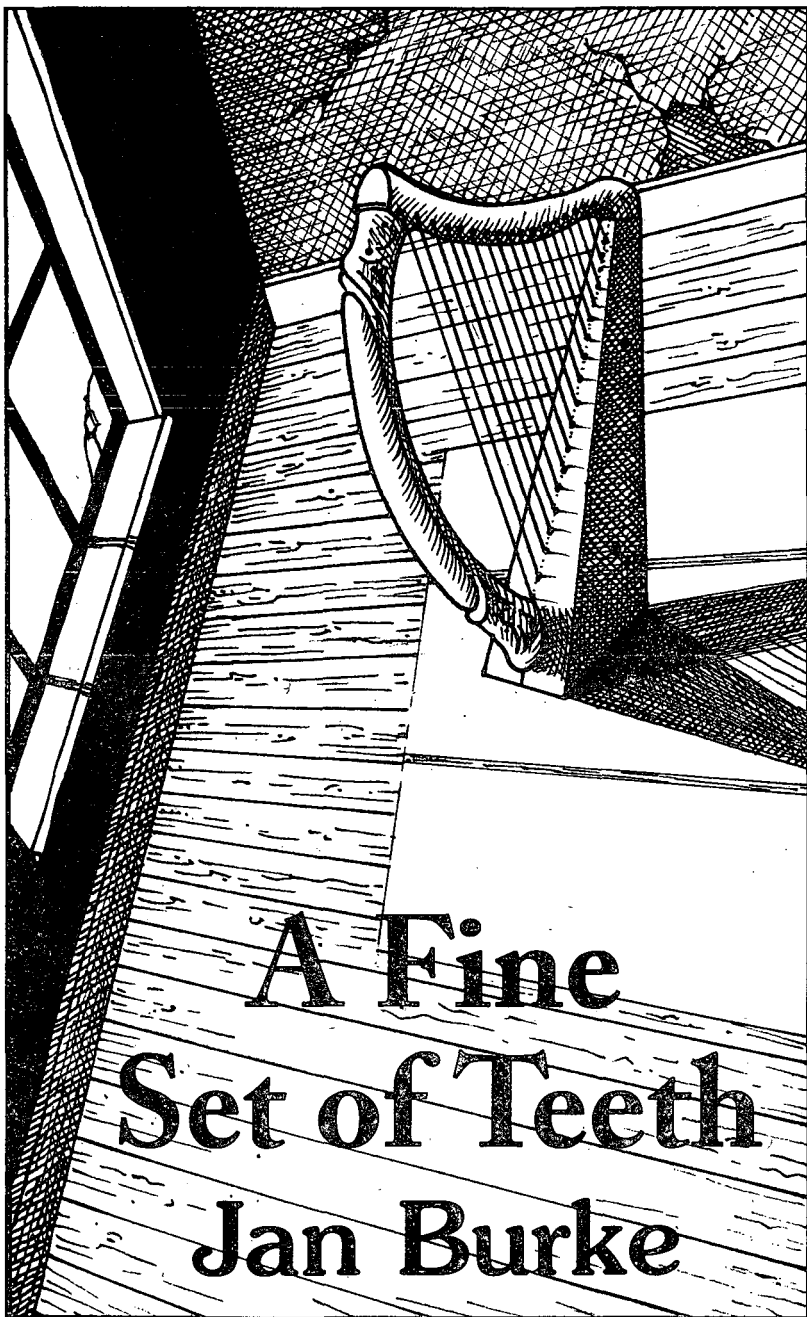


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FICTION



A Fine Set of Teeth Jan Burke

I saw Frank drop two cotton balls into the front pocket of his denim jacket, and I made a face. "Those won't help, you know."

He smiled and said, "Better than nothing."

"Cotton is not effective ear protection."

He picked up his keys by way of ignoring me and said, "Are you ready?"

"You don't have to go with me," I offered again.

"I'm not letting my wife sit alone in a sleazy bar. No more arguments, all right?"

"If I were on a story—"

"You aren't. Let's go."

"Thanks for being such a good sport about it," I said, which made him laugh.

"Which apartment number?" Frank asked as we pulled up to the curb in front of Buzz Sullivan's apartment building. The building was about four stories high, probably built in the 1930's. I don't think it had felt a paintbrush along its walls within the last decade.

"Buzz didn't tell me," I answered. "He just said he lived on the fourth floor."

Frank sighed with long suffering, but I can ignore someone as easily as he can and got out of the car.

As we made our way to the old stucco building's entry, we dodged half a dozen kids who were playing around with a worn soccer ball on the brown crabgrass lawn. The children were laughing and

calling to one another in Spanish. A dried sparrow of a woman watched them from the front steps. She seemed wearier than Atlas.

For the first of the three flights of stairs Frank muttered at my back about checking mailboxes but soon followed in silence. Although Buzz had moved several times since I had last been to one of his apartments, I knew there would be no difficulty in locating the one that was his. We reached the fourth floor and Frank started to grouse, but soon the sound I'd been waiting for came to my ears. Not just my ears: I heard the sound under my fingernails, beneath my toes, and in places my mother asked me never to mention in mixed company. Three screeching notes strangled from the high end of the long neck of a Fender Stratocaster, a sound not unlike those a pig might make—if it were having its teeth pulled with a pair of pliers.

I turned to look at Frank Hariman and saw something I rarely see on his face: fear. Raw fear.

I smiled. I would've said something comforting, but he wouldn't have heard me over the next few whammified notes whining from Buzz's guitar. A deaf man could have told you they were coming from apartment 4E. I waited until the sound subsided, asked, "Should we drop you off back at the house?" and watched my husband stalk over to the door of number 4E and rap on it with the kind of ferocious intensity one usually saves for rousing

the occupants of burning buildings.

Q: What's the difference between a dead trombone player and a dead snake in the middle of a road?

A: The snake was on his way to a gig.

The door opened, and a thin young man with a hairdo apparently inspired in color and shape by a sea urchin stood looking at Frank in open puzzlement. He swatted a few purple spikes away from his big blue eyes and finally saw me standing nearby. His face broke into an easy, charming smile.

"Irene!" He looked back at Frank. "Is this your cop?"

"No, Buzz," I said, "that's my husband."

Buzz looked sheepish. "Oh, sorry. I've told Irene I'm not like that, and here I am, acting just exactly like that."

"Like what?" Frank asked.

"I don't mind that you're a cop," Buzz said proudly.

"That's big of you," Frank said. "I was worried you wouldn't accept our help."

Buzz, who is missing a sarcasm detection gene, just grinned and held out a hand. "Not at all, man, not at all. It's really good of you to offer to take me to the gig. Guess Irene told you my car broke down. Come on in."

Buzz's purple hair was one of two splashes of color in his ensemble; his boots, pants, and shirt were black, but a lime green gui-

tar—still attached by a long cable to an amp—and matching strap stood out against this dark backdrop.

There was no question of finding a seat while we waited for Buzz to unhook his guitar and put it in a hard-shell case. The tiny apartment was nearly devoid of furniture. Two plastic milk crates and a couple of boards served as a long, low coffee table of sorts. Cluttered with several abandoned coffee mugs and an empty bowl with a bent spoon in it, the table stood next to a small mattress heaped with twisted sheets and laundry. The mattress apparently served as both bed and couch.

There were two very elegant objects in the room, however—a pair of Irish harps. The sun was setting in the windows behind them and in the last light of day they stood with stately grace, their fine wooden scrollwork lovingly polished to a high sheen.

"You play these?" Frank said in astonishment.

Without looking up from the guitar, which he was carefully wiping down with a cloth, Buzz said, "Didn't you tell him, Irene?"

"I first met Buzz at an Irish music festival," I said. "He doesn't just play the harp."

"Other instruments, too?" Frank asked.

"Sure," Buzz said, looking back at us now. "I grew up in a musical family."

"That isn't what I meant," I said. "He doesn't just play it. He coaxes it to sing."

"Sure and you've an Irish silver tongue now, haven't ye, me beauty?" Buzz said with an exaggerated brogue.

"Prove my point, Buzz. Play something for us."

He shook his head. "Haven't touched them in months except to keep the dust off them," he said. "That's the past." He patted the guitar case. "This is the future." He laughed when he saw my look of disappointment. "My father feels the same way—but promise you won't stop speaking to me like he has."

"No. What you play is your choice."

"Glad to know at least one person thinks so. Shall we go?"

"Need help carrying your equipment?" Frank offered. I was relieved to see him warming up a little.

"Oh no, I'm just taking my ax, man."

"Your ax?"

"My guitar. I never leave it at the club. My synthesizer, another amp, and a bunch of other stuff are already at the club—I leave those there. But not my Strat."

Q: How do you get a guitar player to turn down?

A: Put sheet music in front of him.

On the way to Club 99, Buzz talked to Frank about his early years of performing with the Sullivan family band, recalling the friendship his father shared with my late mentor, O'Connor.

"O'Connor told me to go to this music festival," I said. "There was a fifteen-year-old lad who could play the Irish harp better than anyone he'd ever met, and when he got to heaven, he expected no angel to play more sweetly."

"Oh, I did all right," Buzz said shyly. "But my training wasn't formal. She tell you that she helped me get into school, Frank?"

"No—"

"It was your own hard work that got you into that program," I said.

"Naw, I couldn't have done it without you. You talked that friend into teaching me how to sight-read." He turned to Frank. "Then she practically arm-wrestled one of the profs into giving me an audition."

Frank smiled. "She hasn't changed much."

"Sorry, Buzz," I said. "I thought it was what you wanted."

"It was!" Buzz protested. "And I never could have gone to college without your help."

"Nonsense. You got the grades on your own, and all the talent and practice time for the music was your own. But when your dad told me you dropped out at the beginning of this past semester, I just figured—"

"I loved school. I only left because I had this opportunity."

"What opportunity?" Frank asked.

"The band you're going to hear tonight," he said proudly.

I was puzzled. "It's still avant-garde?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. I guess I never thought there was much money in avant-garde."

"Not here in the U.S. Locally, Club 99 is about the only place we can play regularly, and they don't pay squat there. Our band is too outside for a lot of people."

"Outside?" I asked.

"Yeah, it means—different. In a good way. You know, we push the envelope. Our music's very original, but for people who want the Top Forty, we're a tough listen. That's the trouble with the music scene here in the States. But Mack—our bass player—came up with this great plan to get us heard over in Europe. We made a CD a few months ago, and it's had a lot of air play there. We just signed on for a big tour, and when it's over, we've got a steady gig set up in a club in Amsterdam."

"I had no idea all this was happening for you, Buzz. Congrats."

"Thanks. I'm so glad you're finally going to get to hear us play—three weeks from now we'll be in Paris. Who knows when you'll get a chance to hear us after that. Frank, it's been awhile since Irene heard me play and—oh!" He pointed to the right. "Here's the club. Park here at the curb. There's not really any room in back."

He had pointed out a small brown building that looked no different from any other neighborhood bar on the verge of ruin. A small marquee read: LIVE MUSIC. WAST LAND. NO COVER CHARGE BEFORE 7 P.M.

"Wast Land?" Frank asked. "Is that your band?"

"The Wasteland. The 'e' is missing. And the word 'The.'"

"You named the band after Eliot's poem?"

"You've read T. S. Eliot's poetry?" Buzz asked in unfeigned disbelief.

"Yeah. I think it made me a more dangerous man."

I rolled my eyes.

Buzz sat back against the seat and grinned.

"Cool!"

Q: What band name on a marquee will always guarantee a crowd?

A: Free Beer.

As we pushed open the padded vinyl door of Club 99, our nostrils were assailed by that special blended fragrance—a combination of stale cigarette smoke, old sweat, spilt beer, and unmopped men's room—that is the mark of the true dive. I was thinking of borrowing Frank's cotton and sticking it in my nose.

Behind the bar a thin old man with tattoo-covered arms and a cigarette dangling from his mouth was stocking the beer cooler, squinting as the cigarette's smoke rose into his face. He nodded at Buzz, stared a moment at Frank, then went back to his work. We were ignored completely by the only other occupant, a redfaced man in a business suit who was gazing into a whisky glass.

"I thought you said the band was meeting here at seven," I

said as we walked along the sticky floor toward the stage.

I glanced at my watch. Seven on the dot.

"The others are always late," Buzz said. He set up his guitar, then invited us into a small back-stage room that was a little less smelly than the rest of the bar. It housed a dilapidated couch and a piano that bore the scars of drink rings and cigarette burns. The walls of the room were covered with a colorful mixture of graffiti, band publicity photos, and handbills.

"Is there a photo of your band up here?" Frank asked.

"Naw. Most of those are pretty old. But I can show you photos of the other members of the band. Here's Mack and Joleen, when they were in Maggot." He pointed to two people in a photo of a quartet. Everyone wore the pouting rebel expression that has become a standard in band photos. The man Buzz pointed out was a bass player about Buzz's age with long, thick, black hair. The woman, boyishly thin, also had long, thick, black hair.

"That photo's about ten years old. Mack and Joleen were together then."

"Together?"

"Yeah. You know, lovers."

"They aren't now?"

"No, haven't been for years. But they get along fine."

Q: What's the difference between a drummer and a drum machine?

A: With a drum machine you

only have to punch in the information once.

"Over here's a photo of Gordon. He's a great drummer," Buzz said. "He hates this photo. He said the band stank. Its name sure did." He pointed to a photo of a band called Unsanitary Conditions.

Buzz was right—I didn't think too many club owners would be ready to put that on their marquees.

The drummer, a lean but muscular man, wasn't wearing a shirt over his nearly hairless chest. He had also shaved all the hair from his head. He held his drumsticks tucked in crossed arms. He was frowning. It didn't look like a fake frown.

Live, updated versions of two of the band members arrived a few minutes later. Gordon looked pretty much the same as he did in the Unsanitary Conditions photo. He was wearing a shirt and he had short orange hair on his head, but the frown gave him away.

"Her Royal Highness is late again, I see," he seethed, adding a couple of colorful phrases before he realized that Buzz wasn't alone. He then smiled and said politely, "Hi, I'm Gordon. Are you Buzz's folks?"

Frank snorted with laughter behind me.

"Oh man!" Buzz said in embarrassment. "These are my friends. They aren't *that* old!"

"Sorry," Gordon said. "Buzz, did you listen to that tape I gave

you?" He broke off as the door opened again.

Preempting a repeat of Gordon's mistake, Buzz quickly said, "Mack, these are my *friends*. Frank and Irene, this is Mack."

It was a good thing Buzz introduced us. Mack was now balding, and his remaining hair was very short, including his neatly trimmed beard. I judged him to be in his mid-thirties, closer to our age than Buzz's, with Gordon somewhere in between the two.

"Hi, nice to meet you," he said, but seemed distracted as he looked around the small room.

"No," Gordon said, "Joleen isn't here yet." He shook his head. "Can you imagine what touring with her will be like?"

"Don't worry about it," Mack said placatingly. "She'll be very professional."

Gordon didn't look convinced.

"Uh, Buzz," Mack said, "the house is getting full. Maybe you should find some seats for your friends."

I thought Mack was just trying to make the band's infighting more private, but when Buzz led us back into the club, a transformation had taken place. Taped music was playing over the speakers, a recording of frenzied sax riffs that could barely be heard above people talking and laughing and drinking.

There was an audience now. The man in the business suit had left the bar, and the place was starting to fill up with a crowd that seemed mainly to be made

up of young . . . as I sought a word for the beret-clad, goatee-wearing men and their miniskirted female companions, Frank whispered, "Beatniks! And to think I gave away my bongo drums."

"Poetry and bongo drums?" I whispered back. "Did Kerouac make you want to run away from home?"

"As Buzz said, I'm not *that* old."

Buzz wanted us to sit near the stage, but I knew better. I muttered something about acoustics, and we found a table along the back wall next to the sound man. Buzz sat with us for a few minutes, and I was pleased to see that Frank was starting genuinely to like him.

Buzz might not be sarcastic but he is Irish, and he was spinning a tale about learning to play the uilleann pipes that had us weeping with laughter. Just then a woman walked onstage, shielded her eyes from the lights, and said over one of the microphones, "Buzz! Get your behind up here—now!"

Q: What's the difference between a singer and a terrorist?

A: You can negotiate with a terrorist.

The club fell silent, and there was a small ripple of nervous laughter before conversation started up again. The sound man belatedly leaned over and turned off her mike. He shook his head, murmured, "*Maybe* I'll remember to turn that on again, bitch,"

and upped the volume on the house speakers. I could hear the saxophone recording more clearly now, but I was distracted by my anger toward the woman.

She was thin and dressed in a black outfit that was smaller than some of my socks. Her hair was short and spiky; I couldn't see her eyes, but her mouth was hard, her lips drawn tight in a painted ruby slash across her pale face.

"Joleen," Buzz said as if the name explained everything. He quickly excused himself and hurried up to the stage as Joleen stepped back out of the lights. The other members of the band soon joined them onstage. If Buzz had been bothered by her tone, he didn't show it.

The group did a sound check, only briefly delayed while Joleen cursed out the sound man and proved she might not need a mike. The members of the band then left the stage with an argument in progress. Although I couldn't make out what they were saying, Gordon and Joleen were snapping at one another, the drummer looking ready to raise a couple of knots on her head. Mack was making "keep it quiet" motions with his hands, while Buzz seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, ignoring all of them.

"I think I'm going to need a drink," Frank said. "You want one?"

"Tell you what—I'll drive home. Have at it."

Frank spent some time talking

to the bartender, then came back with a couple of scotches. He downed the first one fairly quickly and was taking his time with the second when the band came back onstage.

Q: How can you tell if a stage is level?

A: The bass player is drooling out of both sides of his mouth.

The sound man turned on his own mike and said, "Club 99 is pleased to welcome The Wasteland." There was a round of enthusiastic applause.

Joleen held the mike up to her lips and said softly, "We're going to start off with a little something called 'Ankle Bone.'" Amid hoots and whistles of approval the band began to play.

The music was rapid-fire and intricate and quite obviously required great technical skill. Joleen's voice hit notes on an incredible range. There were no lyrics (unless they were in some language spoken off-planet), but her wild mix of syllables and sounds was clearly not sloppy or accidental.

The rest of the band equaled her intensity. As Mack and Buzz played, their fingers flew along the frets; Gordon drummed to complex and changing time signatures. But at the end of the first song and Frank's second scotch, he leaned over and whispered, "Five bucks if you can hum any of that back to me."

He was right, of course, but out of loyalty to Buzz I said, "They

just aren't confined by the need to be melodic."

Frank gave an emperor's-new-clothes sort of snort and stood up. "I'm going to get another drink. I'll pay cab fare for all three of us if you want to join me."

Figuring it would hurt Buzz's feelings if we were both drunk by the end of his gig, I said, "No, thanks."

Q: What do you call someone who hangs out with musicians?

A: A guitar player.

By the end of the set I was seriously considering hurting Buzz's feelings. "Get outside!" one member of the audience yelled in encouragement to the band, and when the sound man muttered, "And stay there," I found myself in agreement. The crowd applauded wildly after every piece (I could no longer think of them as songs, nor remember which one was "Jar of Jam" and which was "Hangman's Slip Knot"), but long before the set ended I had a headache that could drive nails.

Buzz grabbed a bottle of beer at the bar and came back to our table, smiling. Frank surprised me by offering the first compliment.

"You're one hell of a player, Buzz."

"Thanks, man."

They proceeded to go through an elaborate handshaking ritual that left me staring at my husband in wonder. I was spared any comment on music or male

ceremonial greetings when Gordon grabbed the seat next to Buzz.

"Excuse us," Gordon said, turning his shoulders away from us and toward Buzz. "You never told me—did you listen to that tape?"

"Keep your voice down," Buzz said, glancing toward the stage, where Joleen was apparently complaining about something to Mack. He turned back to Gordon. "Yeah, I listened. Your friend's got great keyboard chops."

"Yeah, and you have to admit Susan's also got a better voice than Joleen's. Great bod, too."

Buzz glanced at the stage. "Joleen's bod isn't so bad."

"No, just her attitude. Think of how much better off our band would be with Susan."

"But Joleen started this band —"

"And she's about to finish it, man. She rags on all of us all the time. I'm getting tired of it. This band would be better off without her."

"But they're her songs."

"Hers and Mack's. He has as much right to them as she does."

Buzz frowned, toyed with his beer. "What does Mack say?"

Gordon shrugged. "I'm working on him. I know he was knocked out by Susan's tape. If you say you're up for making the change, I know he will be, too."

"I don't know . . ."

"Look, Buzz, I really love playing with you. Same with Mack. But I can't take much more of Joleen."

"But Europe . . ."

"Exactly. Think of spending ten weeks traveling with that bitch. You want to be in a car with her for more than ten minutes?"

I looked up and saw Joleen walking toward us with purpose in every angry stride. "Uh, Buzz—" I tried to warn, but she was already shouting toward our table.

"I know exactly what you're up to, you jerk!"

Gordon and Buzz looked up guiltily, but in the next moment it became clear that she was talking to the sound man. He didn't seem impressed by her fury.

"You're messing around with the monitors, aren't you?"

The sound man just laughed.

Joleen stood between Frank and me and pointed at the sound man. "You won't be laughing long, you—"

"Joleen," Buzz said, trying to intercede.

"Shut up, you little twerp! You don't know the first thing about music. If you did, you'd understand what this jerk is doing. You try singing while some clown is fooling around with your monitor, making it play back a half-step off."

The effect the sound man had created must have been maddening; the notes she heard back through the speaker at her feet on stage would be just slightly off of the notes she sang into the mike. Still, I couldn't help but bristle at her comments to Buzz.

Instead of being angry with

her, though, Buzz turned to the sound man. "Dude, that's a pretty awful thing to do to her. She's singing some really elaborate stuff, music that takes all kinds of concentration, and you're messing with her head."

The sound man broke eye contact with him, shrugged one shoulder.

"See?" Buzz said to Joleen. "He's sorry. I'm sure it won't happen next set." Before Joleen could protest, Buzz turned to us. "How's it sounding out here?"

Picking up my cue, I said, "Wonderful. He's doing a great job for you guys."

"And what the hell would you know about it?" she said.

"Joleen," Buzz said, "this is my friend from the paper."

She stopped in mid-tantrum and looked at me with new interest. "A reviewer?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well, I was right, then. You don't know what you're talking about." She eyed Frank and said, "You or this cop?"

"How did you know he's a cop?" Buzz asked, but before she could answer, Frank took hold of her wrist and turned it out so the inside of her arm was facing Buzz.

"Oh," he said, "junkies just seem to have a sixth sense about these things."

She pulled her arm away. "They're old tracks, and you know it. I haven't used in years."

Frank shrugged. "If you say so. I really don't want to check out the places I'd have to look if I wanted to be sure."

She narrowed her eyes at him but stomped away without another word. "Hell," Gordon said. "You need anything else to convince you, Buzz?"

"She brought me into the band, man. It just doesn't seem right."

"If another guitar player came along, she'd do this to you in a minute," Gordon said. "You know she would."

Buzz sighed. "We've got three more nights here. Let's at least wait until we finish out this gig to make a decision."

Gordon seemed ready to say more but then excused himself and walked backstage. The minute he was out of earshot, Buzz turned to Frank. "Were they old tracks?"

"Yes."

"I feel stupid not noticing. Not that it matters. If they're old, I mean." His face turned red. "What I mean is, she can really sing."

I watched him for a moment, then said, "You like her."

"Yeah." Buzz forced a laugh. "It's obviously not mutual." He looked toward the stage, then rubbed his hand over his chest as if easing an ache. "Well, I better get ready for the next set."

Frank watched him walk off, then looked over at me. He pushed his drink aside, moved his chair closer to mine.

Q: What do you call a guitarist without a girlfriend?

A: Homeless.

Buzz seemed to recover his

good humor by the time he was onstage. There was an air of anticipation in the audience now. It seemed that most of them had heard the band before and were eagerly awaiting the beginning of this set.

As the band members took their places, I sat wondering what Buzz saw in Joleen. My question was soon answered, though not in words.

Buzz and Joleen stood at opposite ends of the stage facing straight ahead, not so much as glancing at one another. She sang three notes, clear and sweet, and then Buzz began to sing with her, his voice blending perfectly with hers. It was a slow, melodic passage, sung a cappella. The audience was absolutely silent—even Frank sat forward and listened closely.

They sang with their eyes closed as if they would brook no interference from other senses. But they were meeting, somewhere out in the smoky haze above the room, above us all, touching one another with nothing more than sound.

The song's pace began to quicken and quicken, the voices dividing and yet echoing one another again and again until at last their voices came together, holding one note, letting it ring out over us, ending only as the instruments joined in.

The crowd cheered, but the musicians were in a world of their own. Buzz turned to Gordon and Mack, all three of them smiling as they played increas-

ingly difficult variations on a theme. I watched Joleen; she was standing back now, letting the instrumentalists take center stage, her eyes still closed. But as Buzz took a solo, I saw her smile to herself. It was the only time she smiled all evening.

The song ended, and the crowd came to its feet, shouting in acclaim.

Q: Did you hear about the time the bass player locked his keys in the car?

A: It took two hours to get the drummer out.

Mack joined us during the second break between sets. With Buzz's encouragement he told us about the years he'd studied at Berkeley, where he met Joleen, and about some of the odd day-jobs and strange gigs he had taken while trying to make headway with his music career—including once being hired by a Washington socialite to play piano for her dog's birthday party.

We spent more time talking to Mack than to Buzz, whose attentions were taken by another guitar player, a young man who had stopped by to hear the band and now had questions about Buzz's "rig."

"That means his equipment, right?" I asked.

"Not just the equipment," Mack explained. "I play my bass with a really straight-ahead setup; just my bass and my amp." He pointed out his large Peavey amplifier, about four feet tall. "But Buzz's

rig is much more complicated," he said. He went on to tell us that a rig referred not just to the equipment—the guitar, an amp, a set of speakers, a synthesizer, rack effects, and an array of foot-pedals—but also to the ways in which the guitar had been modified, the setup for the synthesizer, and all the other mechanical and electronic aspects of Buzz's playing.

"None of which will ever help that poor guy play like Buzz does," he said. "Buzz has the gift."

"He feels lucky to be in this band," I said. "He has great respect for the other players."

Mack smiled. "He's a generous guy." As Joleen walked over to Buzz and handed him a beer, Mack added softly, "He's a little young yet, and I worry that maybe he has a few hard lessons to learn. Hope it won't discourage him."

"How do you two manage to work together?" I asked.

He didn't mistake my meaning. "You mean because of Joleen's temper? Or because we used to be together?"

"Both."

"As far as the temper goes, I'm used to her: Over the years we've played with a lot of different people; I've outlasted a lot of guys who just couldn't take her attitude. Great thing about Buzz is that he's not just talented, he's easy to get along with. He's able to just let her tantrums and insults roll off him."

"And Gordon?" Frank asked.

"Oh, I don't think Gordon is going to put up with it much longer. The musician's lot in life, I guess. Bands are hard to hold together. Talk to anybody who's played in them for more than a couple of years, he'll have more than a few stories about band fights and breakups."

"But from what Buzz tells us, you've worked hard to reach this point—the CD, the tour, the gig in the Netherlands—"

"Yeah. I'm hoping Joleen and Gordon will come to their senses and see that we can't let petty differences blow this chance. I think they will." He paused, took a sip of beer. "You were also asking about how Joleen and I manage to work together after being in a relationship, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, she and I have always had something special. We write songs together. Musically, we're a good fit. When we were younger, when we first discovered that we could compose together, there was a sort of passion in the experience, and we just assumed that meant we'd be a good fit in every other way. But we weren't."

"Still," I said, "I'd think it would be painful to have to work with someone after a breakup."

He smiled. "I won't lie. At first it was horrible. But what was happening musically was just too good to give up. The hurt was forgotten. Over the years we each found other people to be with. And like I said, we have something special of our own, and we'll always have that."

He glanced at his watch. "Better get ready for the last set. You two want to come out to dinner with us afterwards?"

"Thanks for the invitation," Frank said, "but I'm wearing down. Irene, if you want to stay —"

I shook my head. "Thanks, but I'll have to take a rain check, too."

"Another time, then. I forget that other people aren't as wired after a gig as the band is. I'll check with Buzz—I can give him a lift home if he wants to join us."

I toyed with the idea of heading home early if Buzz should decide to go out to dinner with the band. But my mental rehearsal of the excuses I'd make on my way out the door was cut short when Buzz stopped by the table and said, "They asked me if I wanted to go to dinner with them but they're just going to argue, so I'd rather go home after this last set. Is that okay?"

"Of course," I said, hoping my smile didn't look as phony as it felt.

We went backstage after the last set, but it was clear the band was not going to linger. Joleen and Gordon were already on their way out the door, saying they'd see Mack at a nearby all-night coffeeshop. Buzz and Mack stood near one another, guitar cases in hand. Mack asked us to excuse them for a moment and started to take Buzz aside.

"That's okay," I said. "We'll wait for Buzz at the car—nice meeting you, Mack."

When he caught up with us, Buzz was smiling. "Mack fronted me some of what we're owed by the club—knew I was running a little short because of the car." He sighed in relief, then frowned. "Hope he checked it out with Joleen first. They're supposed to decide things together."

"I don't think she'd mind," I said. "Sounds as if it's a personal loan from him, not the band."

Q: Why did God give drummers ten percent more brains than horses?

A: So no one would have to clean up after them during the parade.

"What was the name of the first song in the second set?" Frank asked Buzz as we drove him home. Buzz was being uncharacteristically quiet, staring out the car window. But at the question he smiled.

"It's called 'Draid Bhreá Fiacla.' That's Irish for 'a fine set of teeth.'"

"How romantic," I said.

"It is, really. Joleen rarely smiles but once I said something that made her laugh and she had this beautiful grin on her face after. When I saw it, I said, 'Well, look there! You've a fine set of teeth. I wonder why you hide them.'"

"Did she have an answer?"

He laughed. "In a way. She bit me. Not hard, just a playful little bite. So the next time I saw her, I gave her the song and told her its name and got to see the smile again."

"You wrote that song?" Frank asked.

"She worked on it some after I gave it to her, made it better. It belongs to both of us now, I suppose."

"Of all the ones we heard tonight, that one's easily my favorite," I said.

"Mine, too," Frank said.

"Joleen says it's too melodic," he said. "But I don't think she means it. She just doesn't want me to think too highly of myself."

Q: What's the difference between a viola and an onion?

A: Nobody cries when you chop up a viola.

"Thanks again for the ride," he said when we pulled up in front of his apartment.

"You have a way to the club tomorrow night?" Frank asked. "I could give you a ride if you need one."

"The Chevette is supposed to be ready by late afternoon. I'm kind of glad it broke down. It was great to meet you, man."

"You too. Stay in touch."

"I will. You take care, too, Irene."

After Buzz closed the car door, Frank said, "Let's wait until he's inside the building."

Having noticed the three young toughs standing not far down the sidewalk, I had already planned to wait. But Buzz waved to them, they waved back, and he made his way to the door without harm.

It was about three in the morn-

ing when we got to bed. When Buzz called at ten o'clock, we figured we had managed to have almost a full night's sleep. Still, at first I was too drowsy to figure out what he was saying. Then again, fully awake I might not have understood the words that came between hard sobs. There were only a few of them.

"She's dead, Irene. My God, she's dead."

"Buzz? Who's dead?" I asked. Frank sat up in bed.

"Joleen."

"Joleen? Oh, Buzz . . ."

"She . . . she killed herself. Can you come over here? You and Frank?"

"Sure," I said. "We'll be right over."

By the time we got there, he was a little calmer. Not much, but enough to be able to tell us that Gordon had found her that morning, that she had hanged herself.

"It's his fault, the bastard!" He drew a hiccuping breath. "Last night, when they went out to dinner, he told Joleen he was quitting the band. Mack tried to talk him out of it, but I guess Gordon wouldn't give in."

"Gordon called you?"

"No, Mack. He told me she made some angry remark, said we'd just find a new drummer. Mack was upset and said he didn't want to try to break in a new drummer in three weeks' time, that he was going to cancel the tour. He told her he was tired of her tantrums, tired of working

for months with people only to have her run them off. It must have just crushed her—she worked so hard—"

I held him, let him cry, as Frank went into the kitchen. I could hear him opening cupboards. Finally he asked, "Any coffee, Buzz?"

Buzz straightened. "Just tea, sorry. I'll make it."

He regained some of his composure as he went through the ritual of making tea. As the water heated, he turned to Frank. "The police will be there, won't they?"

"Yes. It's not my case, but I'll find out what I can for you. The detectives will want to talk to you—"

"To me? Why?"

"Standard procedure. They'll talk to the people closest to her, try to get a picture of what was going on in her life."

"Do you think she—I mean, hanging, is it quick?"

"Yes, it's quick," Frank said firmly. I admired the authority in it, knowing that he was probably lying. Suicide by hanging is seldom an efficient matter—most victims slowly suffocate. But if Joleen's suffering hadn't been over quickly, at least some small part of Buzz's was.

"Thanks," Buzz said. "I thought you would know." He sighed and went back to working at making tea. I straightened the small living room, made it a little more tidy before Buzz brought the tea in and set it on the coffee table.

We sat on the floor although

Buzz offered us the mattress-couch. He took two or three sips from the cup, set it down, then went to stand by the window. The phone rang, but he didn't answer it. "Let the machine get it," he said in a strained voice. "I can't talk to anybody else right now."

The answering machine picked up on the fourth ring. We heard Buzz's happy-go-lucky outgoing message, then the beep, then, "This is Parker's Garage. The part we were waiting for didn't come in, so the Chevette won't be ready today. Sorry about that."

"Aw, Christ, it only needed that!"

"Look, Buzz," I said, "if you need a ride anywhere, we'll take you."

"I've imposed on you enough. And after the last twenty-four hours, Frank has undoubtedly had his fill of Buzz Sullivan."

"No. Not at all," Frank said.

The phone rang again. This time he answered it. "Hi, Mack." He swallowed hard. "Not too good. You?" After a moment he said, "Already? . . . Yeah, all right."

He hung up and shook his head. "The club wants us to have our stuff out of there before tonight. They've already asked another band to play. Guess it's the guys who were going to start there when we went to Europe."

"You need a ride?" Frank asked.

"Yeah. I hate to ruin your weekend—"

"We're with a friend," I said. "It isn't ruined. What time do you need to be there?"

"Soon as possible. He said the detectives want to talk to us there. Club owner, too—he told Mack, 'I'm not too happy about any of this!'—like anybody is!"

Q: What's the difference between a bull and an orchestra?

A: An orchestra has the horns in the back and the ass in front.

We arrived before the others and found the door locked. We walked around to the narrow alley, reaching the back door just as the owner pulled up—the bartender from the night before. He looked like he wanted to give Buzz a piece of his mind but thought better of it when he took a look at Frank. Frank is six four, but I don't think it's just his height that causes this kind of reaction among certain two-legged weasels. (I asked him about it once, and he told me he got straight A's in intimidation at the police academy; I stopped trying to get a straight answer out of him after that.)

The owner grumbled under his breath as he unlocked the door and punched in the alarm code, then turned on the lights. I walked in behind him. I had only taken a couple of steps when I realized that Buzz was still outside; without being able to see him, I could hear him sobbing again. Frank stepped into the doorway, motioned me to go on in. I heard him talking in low, consoling tones to Buzz, heard Buzz talking to him.

I squelched an unattractive lit-

tle flareup of jealousy I felt then; a moment's dismay that someone who had known Buzz for only a few hours was comforting him when I had been his friend for several years. How stupid to insist that the provision of solace be on the basis of seniority.

My anger at myself must have shown on my face in some fierce expression because the owner said, "Look, I'm sorry. I just didn't get much sleep. This place don't close itself, and now at eleven o'clock I've already had a busy morning. But I really am sorry about that kid out there. He's the nicest one of the bunch. And I think he had eyes for the little spitfire." He shook his head. "I never would have figured her for the type to off herself, you know?"

"I didn't really know her," I said. "I just met her last night."

"She had troubles," he said. "But she was always the type to get more mad than sad." He shrugged. "I don't know. She was complicated—like that music she sang."

He started moving around the club, taking chairs off tabletops. I helped him, unable to stand around while he worked. In full light the club seemed even smaller and shabbier than it had in the dark.

Soon Buzz and Frank came in. Frank started helping Buzz pack away his equipment. Within a few moments other people arrived: the detectives, then Mack and Gordon.

None of the band members

seemed in great shape. The detectives recognized Frank and pulled him aside, then asked the owner if they could borrow his office.

They asked to talk to Mack first. He went with them. Gordon climbed the stage steps and began to put away his cymbals.

Frank surreptitiously positioned himself between Buzz and Gordon. They worked quietly for a while, then Gordon said, "I'm sorry, Buzz. I—I never would have said anything to her if I'd thought . . ."

"It's not your fault," Buzz said wearily, contradicting his earlier outburst. He finished closing the last of his cases and began helping Gordon.

Mack came out and told the bar owner that the detectives wanted to talk to him next. By then most of the equipment had been carried into the backstage room. All that was left was a single mike stand—Joleen's.

I walked onto the stage and stood where she had stood during "A Fine Set of Teeth." I thought of her voice, clear and sweet on those first notes, her smile as she listened to Buzz's solo. I looked out and wondered how she saw that small sea of adoring faces that must have been looking back at her; wondered if she had known of Buzz's loyalty to her; remembered the bite and figured she had. I thought of her giving the sound man hell; she had both bark and bite.

I saw Mack, standing at the

bar, at about the same moment he saw me. He stared at me, making me wonder if I was causing him to see ghosts.

Feeling like an interloper, I stepped away from the empty mike stand, then paused. I had the nagging feeling that something about the stage wasn't right. Something was missing. Of course, most of the equipment had been packed up already—it was that thought which made me realize what was bothering me. I glanced back at Mack, then called my husband over.

"Tell your friends not to let Mack leave," I whispered. "There's something he needs to explain."

"Are you going to tell me about it, or has being on this stage gone to your head?"

"Both. Where is Mack's big Peavey amp?" I asked. "Or Joleen's mike and monitor?"

Frank looked around, then smiled. "I'll be right back. And maybe you should try to stand close to Buzz. This will be hard on him." He took a step away, then turned back. "How did you know it was murder?" he whispered.

"I didn't. Not until just now. Ligature marks?"

He nodded.

I walked into the backstage room. Gordon sat on the couch. Buzz was sitting on the piano bench. I sat down next to Buzz and lifted the keyboard cover. "You play?" he asked.

"Sure." I tapped out the melody line of "Heart and Soul." "It's one of two pieces I can play," I said.

A corner of his mouth quirked up. "The other being 'Chopsticks'?"

"How did you know?"

"People just seem to know those two," he said, reminding me about the missing sarcasm gene.

"Come on," I said. "Play the other half."

"Half?" he said, filling in the chords.

"Okay, three-quarters."

Gordon laughed.

"Come on," Buzz said, "there's room for you, too."

"I'll pass," he said, "I don't even know 'Chopsticks.'"

We stopped when we heard Gordon shout, "What are you doing to Mack?" We turned to see Mack being led out in handcuffs.

"They're arresting him," Frank said as they left. "For Joleen's murder."

"So tell me again how you figured this out," Buzz asked later when we were back at his apartment. We were sitting on the floor around the coffee table.

"Okay," I said. "We were the first ones at the club this morning, right?"

He nodded.

"You and Gordon both had equipment to pack up. Your equipment was still on the stage because when you left Club 99 last night, you had every intention of coming back tonight. But one band member knew he wouldn't be back. Mack was the last band member to leave the club. He packed up his amplifier and took it home."

"You figured that out just standing there?"

"I was thinking about that dirty trick the sound man pulled on her—making her hear her own voice a half-step off through the monitor. But the mike and monitor were gone, and so was Mack's amp. I knew you didn't pack them up, neither did Gordon. You had only worked on your part of the stage, or to help Gordon. So Mack must have taken his equipment and Joleen's from the stage. But then I realized that he hadn't been on the stage this morning—he was questioned by the police as soon as he got there. I didn't notice what was missing at first—his equipment isn't as elaborate as your rig, or Gordon's kit. Neither was Joleen's."

"And the marks you were talking about?" he asked Frank.

"You're sure you want to hear about this?"

"Yeah."

"There were two sets of marks on her neck—the type of mark known as ligature marks. One set was horizontal, across her neck—the other was V-shaped, from her chin to behind her ear. The second set of marks would be typical of a suicide by hanging, but they were postmortem—they were made by the rope sometime after she was dead. The first marks—the horizontal ones—were the ones that were made by the pull of the rope when she was alive—made when someone stood behind her and strangled her."

Buzz was silent for a long time, then asked, "Why?"

"Mack probably told her the truth at the restaurant," Frank said. "He had lost a lot of good players because of her attitude. Just as it looks as if things have stabilized and The Wasteland's big break is coming along, she starts making trouble with Gordon."

"But she was the heart of the group! Her voice."

"Gordon was going to offer him a new singer," Frank reminded him.

"Susan?"

"I suppose he would have worked with Susan on the songs he had already written with Joleen, then taken Susan with the band to Europe."

Buzz frowned. "You're right. He had already given her a couple of them to learn. Susan sang them on the tape Gordon brought last night."

"Mack wanted to make sure he had sole rights to the songs."

"Oh, and then what?" Buzz asked angrily. "What did he think would happen down the road? Have you ever heard one of Mack's songs? Dull stuff. Technically passable, but nothing more. He just provided the wood. She set it on fire. With her dead, who would have provided that fire?"

"Now," I said, "I think you're getting closer."

They both stared at me.

"Buzz," I asked, "until you wrote 'A Fine Set of Teeth—'"

"You mean 'Draid Bhreá Fiacla?'"

"Yes. Until then had anyone other than Mack written a song with her?"

"No, but he didn't understand that either, did he?" he said, and looked away. "No, he couldn't."

I didn't contradict him, but I wondered if he was right. Perhaps Mack understood exactly what it meant, and perhaps Jo-leen, who had known Mack better than the others, also believed that the safest course was to hide any affection she felt for Buzz. I kept these thoughts to myself; had enough to second-guess the

dead, worse if the theory might bring further pain to the living.

When we were fairly sure he'd be all right, and had obtained promises from him that he'd call us whenever he needed us, we left Buzz's apartment.

We were in the stairwell of the old building when we heard it—the first few notes of 'Draid Bhreá Fiacla,' the notes a woman with a fine set of teeth used to sing with eyes closed.

The notes were being played on an Irish harp, and a young man's voice answered them.

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FICTION

THE RABBI AND THE SORCERER



Russell
William Asplund

Illustration by Louise Goldenberg

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Ayzik the merchant barely felt the tug on his velvet sleeve, but the voice carried through the din of the crowded tavern. "Pay heed, for when four hours have passed you will be killed."

Ayzik looked over his shoulder at the man who had spoken. The man was no larger than a youth, but his beard hung down nearly to his waist. His dark robe and fringed shawl marked him as a fellow Jew; still, Ayzik had no idea what to make of his greeting. He nodded vaguely and pulled his arm away from the small man. Market time brings out all kinds, he thought as he carried his tankard of ale over to sit with his partners.

"Who was that you spoke to?" David asked as Ayzik took his seat next to him. David was fairhaired and pale-skinned, dressed in some of Ayzik's finest silks. He wasn't much of a businessman, but he showed the goods well and he could get them into places a Jew could never hope to go.

Ayzik shrugged. "I've never seen him before in my life. He said in four hours I'd be dead."

"A threat from him?" Oskar laughed. He was almost dark enough to be a Jew himself but for the big iron cross he wore around his neck. "Don't worry. If there's any trouble, I'll back you up."

"I don't think it was a threat," Ayzik said, looking back at the small man. "More like a warning."

The others laughed, and Ayzik joined in. The tavern was filling up quickly, the smell of sweat blending with that of sausages and ale. Market time came only once a year, and it drew people from as far away as Prague. With any luck Ayzik and his partners would make enough this week to last them through the year. Soon they were busy discussing business, shouting to be heard above the thickening crowd.

They finished their meal and were heading for the door when Ayzik felt a tug on his sleeve again. "Know that the hours of life you have left are only three."

Ayzik looked quickly up at the tower clock across the square. Had it been an hour already? Then he caught himself and laughed. David heard him and spun around to see the small man clutching Ayzik's sleeve.

"Now listen, don't you go bothering Ayzik here." David wagged his finger at the small man as you would a young child. "He's the richest Jew in all the province. And he'll be richer still after tomorrow. Eh, Ayzik?"

"Not if we spend all our time in here." Ayzik pulled away from the small man and hurried out of the tavern. He looked back once to see the dark eyes of the small man still upon him, and he shuddered.

There was much to prepare, and the three partners split up to take care of the business. Ayzik went back to the marketplace to secure the stall and arrange the fine cloths and imported silks that were his

trade while the others went off to handle the more public affairs. Ayzik hoped they remembered what he had told them; good partners were hard to come by, especially those willing to work for a Jew. Ayzik sighed. Still, it was all a part of business.

All around him the market busied itself for tomorrow. A spice merchant from across the way stopped to talk briefly, a dark and swarthy man who smelled vaguely of nutmeg. He looked longingly at a bolt of purple linen, which Ayzik noted with professional interest. Other merchants called to him as they passed. Ayzik returned their greetings, bustling around the stall, straightening, matching cloths. There was much to do, but his mind kept wandering. He found himself glancing up at the clock nervously, and he was not surprised that when the clock tolled the hour the small dark man was there again.

"One hour ago I spoke to you and your mouth was filled with laughter. Now there are only two hours left to your life."

The man's dark eyes seemed to pierce him, and his voice was deep and commanding despite his stature. He held Ayzik's gaze for a moment, then turned and walked away. Ayzik's heart was racing, and he sat down next to a bolt of fine grey silk. Something in the way the little man had spoken—soft, yet carrying behind it the weight of years. Ayzik had imagined the prophets of old speaking that way.

He was still there when his friends came back. They held back their laughter when they saw how pale and worried Ayzik looked.

"Why didn't you try to stop him? Perhaps he is trying to kill you; after all, a knife in the back takes no real strength," Oskar said.

"Perhaps you should call the city guard," David suggested.

"I will not call the guard on a fellow Jew," Ayzik said. "But when he comes back, I will not let him go until he tells me everything. Still, I am convinced he means me no harm."

David tried to talk him into calling the guards; after all, who knew what the small man intended? But Ayzik was firm. He sent his partners away, much to their distress, and waited for the small man to return. Sure enough, in one hour the small man appeared at his side.

"Know that in one hour you will leave this world."

Ayzik grabbed him by the shoulders as he spoke. The man felt as if he must weigh nothing, yet he did not shy away from the bigger man. "Tell me who you are, why are you telling me this?" Ayzik said. "I will not let you go until you tell me who is plotting to take my life."

"Good," said the smaller man, a faint smile creeping to his face. "I thought for a while you were willing to go down to the grave without a fight. My name is Rabbi Solomon Meltzer, and you have spoken well, for there are those close to you plotting to kill you."

"How do you know this?" Ayzik tried to speak sharply, but there was a quaver in his voice. Somehow he felt the man was speaking the truth, and he found he was afraid.

"To a righteous man it is sometimes given to know that which is hidden from others. I know that you are a righteous man as well, and not deserving of your fate."

"What then must I do?" Ayzik asked.

"Come with me and do as I say. There is still time yet, but we must hurry. Better you had listened to me three hours ago." Rabbi Meltzer began to walk quickly; Ayzik had to hurry to keep up despite his longer stride.

"You should have made me listen."

Rabbi Meltzer shrugged. "If I had tried harder, would you have thought me any less insane?"

The sun was setting, a glorious display of bright pink and deep blue above the slate-grey roofs of the city. Workers were just beginning to light the gas lamps along the streets as Ayzik hurried after the small rabbi. To his surprise they headed away from the Jewish quarter of the city.

"Where are we going?" Ayzik asked, panting a little from the exertion. He was, after all, a wealthy man, not accustomed to physical labor.

"To the park." Rabbi Meltzer looked back at Ayzik, then pointedly to the tower clock. Ayzik got the message and tried to go a little faster.

"Why the park?" Ayzik asked again as they stopped to let a carriage pass before crossing the street.

"There is a pond there. It's very important that we get you under water." When the carriage was past, the little man was off again. Ayzik shook his head and followed. What was the point of asking questions? Either he would do as the little man said, or he would not. And then he either would or wouldn't be killed. For now he just concentrated on keeping up.

The streets were filled with people—ladies out for an evening stroll, tourists in for market day taking in the sights, and rural farmers who gawked and stared in their homespun shirts and soiled boots. Rabbi Meltzer hurried past them all, sometimes even stooping to a nudge here and there to open up a path.

Soon Ayzik recognized the path to the park. He dared not look up as they hurried beneath a bank's clock. Ayzik's heart beat faster as the tall buildings gave way to tree-lined streets, and finally he saw the expanse of well-groomed lawn that marked the entrance to the park. They hurried through the ornamental gate and down the path that ran along the pond. Green wrought-iron benches dotted the manicured lawn, with seated couples waiting to watch the stars come out. Rabbi Meltzer stopped at the water's edge.

"Get in."

"What?" Ayzik looked around. Already a couple of people had begun to stare.

"You heard me, get in the water. Go on." Rabbi Meltzer motioned him in with his hands. "What would you rather be, wet or dead?"

What choice did he have? Ayzik resolutely ignored the crowd and walked into the cold, clear water. The bank of the pond fell away sharply; he was only a few steps in before the water was nearly up to his shoulders. The bottom was rocky and slippery beneath his feet. "Good," said Rabbi Meltzer from the bank. "Stay right there."

Ayzik thought he could hear laughter from the bank, but he refused to look back. His cloak weighed heavy on his shoulders, and he cursed himself for not thinking to take it off. The cloth would be ruined, no doubt. Behind him he could hear Rabbi Meltzer chanting softly. The dark water of the pond stretched out before him, the reflection of the dying sun shimmering gold off the small waves. A few ducks looked at him quizzically as they glided by. Ayzik tried to ignore them as well.

"Look in front of you." Rabbi Meltzer's voice was deep and commanding. Ayzik looked down at the water, which had suddenly gone completely still—not even a ripple. At first he saw only a reflection of his own face, like gazing into a mirror, but then the image changed before his eyes.

"Tell me what you see," Rabbi Meltzer commanded.

The chill of the water seemed to sink into Ayzik's bones. "I see my business partners, David and Oskar, talking with a man from the Prince's court."

"Who else?" Rabbi Meltzer had to repeat the question twice before Ayzik answered.

"My wife." Ayzik's words were little more than a whisper.

"The man you see is the Prince's sorcerer, a man of great cunning and evil. Many have been deceived by his power, including the Prince. He has been the death of many a Jew, and even the Christians fear him. Your wife is but a pawn, deceived by his power. Our quarrel is with the sorcerer."

Ayzik watched as the tall man greeted the others, and each took a seat around a small table—his table, Ayzik realized. They must be meeting in his apartment.

"Tell me what you see them doing." Rabbi Meltzer's voice pulled him back to the park.

"They are sitting around my table talking. There is a bow on the table between them."

"Good, now you must watch them carefully. The sorcerer's spells cannot find you under water. When he draws back the bow, duck your head beneath the water as long as you can. Do this, and the arrow will pass you by."

Ayzik nodded. He no longer cared what the people on the bank might think; he watched intently as the sorcerer lifted the bow and

notched the arrow. He saw his wife smile as the sorcerer drew back the bow, and it pierced his heart as no arrow ever could, but he quickly slipped below the water. He felt that he could feel the arrow searching for him, and then it was past.

"Tell me what you see," Rabbi Meltzer called as he surfaced. Ayzik rubbed the water from his eyes and looked down at the reflected scene.

"The sorcerer is angry; he can tell his spell did not find its mark."

"Keep watching. If he tries again, you must get under the water."

Even as the rabbi spoke, Ayzik saw the sorcerer draw back another arrow. Ayzik took a quick breath and ducked back beneath the surface of the pond. This time there was no doubt in his mind when the arrow came past; it was like the buzzing of a swarm of angry bees. It took longer this time to pass, and he was almost out of air before he dared raise his head again.

"Watch," said Rabbi Meltzer, but there was no need. Ayzik's eyes were fastened on the water in front of him. Oskar was angry now, yelling at the sorcerer.

"Can't you stop him?" Ayzik asked as small rivulets trickled down his nose and cheeks. David was on his feet, too, now, and Ayzik's wife looked small and frightened. "Your magic lets me see them, can't it be used against them as well?"

"Magic is a delicate thing," Rabbi Meltzer said. "To cast a spell, a magician must put some part of his life into the magic. As the spell goes, so goes his life. Magic must be used sparingly if at all."

"Am I destined to spend my whole life here then, bobbing in and out of the water until they tire of looking for me?"

"Patience, my friend Ayzik. The game is only beginning. Watch closely, and this time when the sorcerer fires, go back under, but leave one finger poking up out of the water."

Even as Rabbi Meltzer spoke, the sorcerer made a gesture with his hand, and David and Oskar were thrown back into their seats as if by a strong wind. The sorcerer drew back the bow, and let fly another arrow.

Ayzik hurriedly dived under the water, but as instructed, he held one finger up in the warm night air. He felt a sharp pain as the magic arrow pierced his finger, and he came up out of the water grabbing his hand and shouting.

"Tell me what you see," Rabbi Meltzer said. Ayzik held his hand to his chest, where the chill water began to numb the pain, and looked down into the pond.

"They are celebrating. They think the arrow has found me, and now they are arguing how to split my property among them." His voice sounded flat in his ears, although he was heartened some to see that his wife did not join in the celebration, looking pale and frightened as the men cheered and pounded each other on the back.

"Magic is a tenuous thing—easily manipulated and easily fooled, for all the work that men put into it." The image in front of Ayzik faded as Rabbi Meltzer spoke. Ayzik turned to find the rabbi holding a hand out to him. "Come on, you can get out now."

Ayzik came out of the water, dripping and cold in the evening breeze. There was a small crowd gathered, watching him. A few smiled, but most looked somber, as if they could sense the dire magic that had just passed by. One woman saw the blood that dripped from his injured hand and gave a little shriek.

Rabbi Meltzer examined the hand. "It's just a scratch, nothing to worry about." He pulled a cloth from somewhere within his robe and wrapped it expertly around the wound.

"Come, let's go. It would be a shame to survive a wizard only to die from pneumonia." Rabbi Meltzer put an arm on his elbow and led him past the crowd. "You should stay with me tonight. Better that they believe you dead for now. Tomorrow we will confront them in a public place and see that justice is done."

They stayed that night at a public inn. It was a small room by Ayzik's standard, but well furnished. When he was dry and warm, Rabbi Meltzer brought him some bread from the kitchen. The rabbi would not let him leave the room for fear that word would get back to the conspirators.

Ayzik slept on the only bed. From what he could see, he did not know if the rabbi slept at all that night. But the small man seemed bright and energetic when he woke Ayzik from his bed.

"Ah, market day," Rabbi Meltzer said, opening the windows and letting in a rush of breeze heavy with foreign scents—crowds, cattle, fish. The smells of the market. "I've always loved market day. Come, let's hurry, I like to get there before the crowds."

Ayzik hurried, his spirits buoyed by the rabbi's good mood. He could almost imagine that he was a boy again, preparing to go to market with a favorite uncle, not preparing to face his would-be assassins. Assassins whom, until recently, he had considered his friends.

They arrived at the market early. Many of the stalls were still covered, and only a few people milled about the aisles. Rabbi Meltzer stopped to sample some exotic fruit and bought fresh rolls from a baker for him and Ayzik to eat as they walked. The rolls were soft and sweet, and Ayzik savored their warmth.

He looked around nervously, wondering what they were going to do. Rabbi Meltzer was quiet, offering no explanation. The crowds grew thicker as the sun rose higher in the sky. They were in front of a tinker's, Rabbi Meltzer eyeing some pots critically, when a fanfare blew across the crowded market.

Rabbi Meltzer set down the pot with a bang. If he had reminded

Ayzik before of a favorite uncle, he reminded him more of a warrior now. The rabbi's dark eyes glinted like flints though he still smiled. "Come on now, it's time."

Crowds seemed to part before Rabbi Meltzer like the waters of the Red Sea before Moses. Ayzik followed in his wake. They hurried along the stalls until they came to the edge of the market, just in time to see the Prince descend from his carriage.

"There." Rabbi Meltzer pointed. Behind the Prince, dressed in a robe of midnight blue, came the sorcerer. He smiled and waved at the crowd that gathered. Ayzik eyed the sorcerer's robe critically—he remembered the cloth well. David had urged him to sell it at a loss to the royal family, to open up channels. Undoubtedly it had, for David.

The Prince's guard opened up a path for the Prince and his entourage; the sorcerer followed, hanging near the back. As he passed into the crowd, Ayzik saw Oskar milling among the other peasants.

"Follow me," Rabbi Meltzer said, and he was off again.

They followed the Prince's entourage as it wound its way through the market. The crowd followed, farmers and merchants and well-dressed ladies all pressing close together for a glimpse of the rulers of the city. Somehow Rabbi Meltzer kept himself and Ayzik near the front of the crowd, but never too close lest they catch the sorcerer's eye.

The mood of the crowd was festive. The people cheered and waved, and as soon as word of the Prince's arrival had spread, traveling minstrels and costumed acrobats gathered to perform for him. Rabbi Meltzer laid a hand on Ayzik's shoulder, and Ayzik realized they were nearing his stall. The noise of the crowd rose and fell like the waves of the ocean, festive and deafening.

Suddenly, as the noise ebbed briefly, the sound of a woman crying floated over the crowd. It was a quiet sound, but it caught the crowd's attention and took the edge off their mood. Who could be so sad on market day?

Ayzik felt his own tears would break free, for he recognized the voice as that of his wife. Rabbi Meltzer's hand tightened on his shoulder, giving Ayzik what comfort he could. Ayzik's wife appeared, dressed in black as befitted the widow she thought herself to be. Her small round face was pale, taut with what most took for grief but Ayzik thought might be fear. She ran and threw herself at the feet of the sorcerer.

"Oh mighty mage, my husband has been missing since last night, and I fear that ill may have befallen him. You are said to know how to find what is hidden. Can you tell me the fate of my husband?"

The crowd was almost silent now. The sorcerer made a show of helping Ayzik's wife to her feet. "Normally men pay dearly for my service, but I can see that you are in distress. Let it never be said the

Prince's servant will turn away his subjects when they are in need. I will do what I can."

The sorcerer waved his rough wooden staff as he began to chant. The words were short and harsh, and as he spoke, the sorcerer's eyes seemed to travel far away, focusing on something no one else could see. Finally he stopped chanting and bowed his head.

"The news is not good. Your husband fell among thieves last night and was slain, God rest his soul. Come with me; I will see that you are cared for."

He placed his arm comfortingly around the woman's shoulders as she began to sob, and frowned sorrowfully. Many in the crowd were brought to tears. Only Ayzik noticed the brief, fearful glance his wife cast at the sorcerer; and that his knuckles were white where he gripped her shoulder tightly. The sorcerer was moving to leave when Rabbi Meltzer spoke.

"Excuse me, but I believe you are mistaken." He propelled Ayzik forward until they stood before the Prince and his sorcerer. "Now, I don't mean to question the words of a great mage, but if I am not mistaken, this man is very much alive."

Ayzik's wife had gone pale; her mouth hung open as she looked from her husband to the sorcerer, several different emotions battling across her face. "Indeed I am," Ayzik said. It sounded stupid, but what else was there to say?

There was a flurry in the crowd, and Ayzik saw Oskar turn and run, elbowing his way through the crowd until he faded into the press of bodies. Rabbi Meltzer spoke softly. "Let him go."

Rabbi Meltzer turned back to the sorcerer. "You have spoken well; last night Ayzik did fall among thieves, but by the power of God he was spared. Perhaps your magic might reveal to us the names of these thieves?"

The sorcerer hesitated as he tried to think of a lie. "My magic does not seem to be so reliable today."

"Nor was it reliable last night when you sought to kill an innocent man." Rabbi Meltzer turned to the Prince. "This man has conspired with Ayzik's wife and partners to slay him so that they might share his wealth. If you care at all for justice among your people, arrest these men at once."

The crowd roared. Ayzik could not hear the Prince's reply in the tumult, but the sorcerer's voice carried over the crowd. "I am as pleased as anyone to see the noble Jew alive. I do not understand how my mistake in thinking him dead would lead anyone to think that I was somehow responsible for a plot on his life. I was asked to help, and I did my best."

"Ah, then you plead incompetence," Rabbi Meltzer said. "Well, I suppose that does carry some weight."

The crowd laughed and the sorcerer shot him a withering glance. "Beware lest I lose patience and let you sample my incompetence."

The sorcerer towered garishly over the simply dressed rabbi, like a peacock over a thrush, but Rabbi Meltzer studiously turned his back to the taller man and looked at the Prince, awaiting his decision. The sorcerer turned to the Prince as well. "This man has questioned both my power and my honor. I cannot let that pass. Let no one doubt—if I had wanted this man dead, then dead he would be. If this Jew would prove his words, then let him prove his power greater than mine."

The Prince looked to Rabbi Meltzer, who nodded and spoke softly. "As you wish."

"Come then, we will go to the market square where all may witness this great contest of powers." The Prince motioned to his entourage, and the crowd surged toward the square at the center of the market.

Ayzik found himself and the rabbi surrounded by the Prince's guard. One of them put a hand on Rabbi Meltzer's arm, but he shook it off. "What, are you afraid I will run away? Go instead and guard the Prince's sorcerer; it is he whose conscience weighs heavily upon him."

The crowd grew as it made its way among the stalls. The smells of cooking, spices, and cattle mixed with the ever-present scent of the crowd. The crowd was quieter now, but there was an underlying tone of expectation. By the time they reached the square it was already teeming with people pushing and shoving for a better look. The Prince's guard had to push the crowd back forcefully to open room for the Prince.

A makeshift court was hastily assembled. A table was produced from somewhere to set upon the grass and covered with a silvery cloth from Ayzik's own booth. Several minor noblemen were located to act as judges, with the Prince himself presiding over the contest. When all was prepared, the Prince sat back in his chair and said, "So, rabbi, perform wonders for us. Show your power."

"I do not perform wonders, but I put my faith and trust in the Lord, whose powers have never failed me."

Ayzik wondered at the wisdom of the rabbi's declaration—in his business dealings he had found it advantageous to let Oskar or David deal with the nobility. Those few times he was forced to do so himself, he always tried to downplay his religion as much as he could without violating his beliefs. And yet, he realized, in the end his trickery had not made him any less a Jew, or any less a target. There was much to admire in the rabbi's bold declaration.

The Prince motioned to the sorcerer. "Then perhaps you would be so kind as to get this contest under way."

"Gladly, my lord," the sorcerer said, bowing low, his robe falling gracefully around him. He then motioned to his servants, who brought him a large wooden bowl filled with water. He threw back his

robe with a dramatic flourish and waved his staff above the bowl three times. At the third pass the water vanished. The crowd cheered as the sorcerer passed the bowl among the seated nobles to prove that it was indeed empty.

Another bowl was produced and placed in front of Rabbi Meltzer. Ayzik looked at the small man nervously, but Rabbi Meltzer looked unconcerned. He filled the bowl from a pitcher of water, held it in his hands as if considering carefully, then brought it to his lips and drained the bowl. When he was done, he sighed contentedly and set the bowl down in front of the nobles.

The crowd muttered angrily, and the Prince cast the bowl aside to clatter on the table. "This is no magic."

"Is my bowl any less empty? Was it any less full before? Then that makes my power as great as his. The rest—" Rabbi Meltzer shrugged "—mere showmanship."

A few in the crowd laughed. Many of the nobles muttered angrily, but the sorcerer held up his hand. "As he has said, a mere parlor trick. If it is power that he wishes to see, then there is no greater power than that of life and death."

With that the sorcerer threw out his arm and spoke one word sharply. Instantly a dove descended to alight on his outstretched hand. Again the sorcerer made a show of waving his staff around the bird three times while calling out in a strange tongue. Sometimes the words were loud and harsh and at other times so soft they seemed to caress the air. When he was finished, the bird lay dead in his hand, its neck twisted around at an odd angle.

He showed the bird to the nobles, who all agreed that it was dead. Again he called out while waving his staff, and this time the bird flew from his hand to alight on his shoulder.

The applause of the crowd was deafening, and Ayzik began to fear that the rabbi would be unable to match this miraculous feat. Even the Prince was applauding.

When the applause died down, the sorcerer spoke to Rabbi Meltzer. "Well, shall I have my servants bring you a bird, or will you call one down from the sky yourself?"

"I prefer to use yours." Rabbi Meltzer put out his arm and spoke softly. The dove flew from the sorcerer's shoulder to alight on the rabbi's hand. Again the rabbi spoke one word softly, and the bird in his hand fell as if dead, its neck twisted badly. He spoke again, and the dove hopped up again.

Three times the rabbi repeated the same words, and each time the bird fell, its neck twisted, only to rise again on another command. Faster and faster the rabbi spoke the commands, until the poor bird flew from his hand in a flurry of feathers and disappeared over the market.

The sorcerer scowled and the nobles looked on in amazement. "What great words of power are these?" the Prince asked.

"Merely those I heard the sorcerer speak when he commanded the dove." Rabbi Meltzer turned to the sorcerer. "To find such a dove and train it is quite a feat. I would need at least a week to do the same. Still, while it is difficult, I do not know that I would call it power."

"Silence." The sorcerer's face was red with anger, and the cords on his neck stuck out sharply. "I will perform one last feat of magic, which I am sure this charlatan cannot match. But I demand that he be taken from here first so he cannot overhear the spell I cast."

Rabbi Meltzer agreed, and he was escorted by the Prince's guard to another place in the market. Ayzik found himself alone facing the sorcerer, who stared at him with unconcealed malice.

"Let us see your guardian match this." The sorcerer spun around, his robes billowing out around him, and stuck his staff into the ground. He spoke a single word, and Ayzik could feel the energy gathering like the angel of death at Pharaoh's door. Suddenly he wished he were back in the pond so he could duck beneath the water.

In front of him the staff began to grow. It spread outward and upward, sprouting gnarled limbs and bright green leaves. The tree blossomed, the thick pink flowers cascading over the square with their sweet-smelling perfume, then falling away to drift like snow. A small green apple appeared at the top of the tree and began to ripen, and was followed by others, until the tree hung heavy with ripened fruit. The crowd roared its approval, and the sorcerer turned to the Prince with a look of triumph. "Merely let the Jew return this tree to its natural state, and I will concede his power. But if he cannot make my staff again a staff, then I demand his life for the insults that I have suffered."

"So it shall be," the Prince said. The sorcerer looked at Ayzik hungrily. While his name had not been brought up, Ayzik had no doubt what would happen to him if Rabbi Meltzer failed. He spoke up, still looking at the tree.

"Your sorcerer demanded that Rabbi Meltzer not be present while he performed his wonder. It is only fair, then, that the sorcerer afford Rabbi Meltzer the same privilege. Let him be taken away while the rabbi attempts what has been asked of him."

It was a small thing, but maybe it would help. The Prince agreed reluctantly, so the sorcerer was led away and Rabbi Meltzer brought forward. Ayzik described to him all that had transpired. Rabbi Meltzer raised an eyebrow when he described the ripening fruit, asking Ayzik to point out the limb where the first fruit had appeared.

"Begin," the Prince commanded.

Rabbi Meltzer walked once around the tree, looking at it closely. He turned to the Prince. "This is a fine tree. You are sure he wished it turned back to a staff?"

"Only then will he concede your power."

Rabbi Meltzer reached up and plucked a dark red apple from the lowest branch. He chewed it thoughtfully as he walked again around the tree. "No staff ever gave apples like this. Far better it be left as it is. You are sure he wished it to be turned back?"

The Prince leaned forward. "That is what he said. Now be quick about it."

Rabbi Meltzer shrugged and began to walk around the tree again. "But look at the beauty of its leaves, the delicious coolness of the shade it gives. This very spot was made for such a tree. Certainly there is some other feat I can perform?"

"You will turn the tree back to a staff or your life is forfeit. That is the task set before you. If you cannot do it, then do not waste my time." The Prince was on his feet, and the crowd muttered darkly. Ayzik began to glance around, looking for a way to escape just in case.

Rabbi Meltzer raised his hands in defeat. "As you command it, so it shall be done."

He finished circling the tree and called one of the guards to him. "I am but a small man; do you see that apple there on top of the tree—the really red one. Surely that is an apple fit for a king, or maybe a Prince. If you will cut that apple from the tree and give it to the Prince, then I will admit defeat."

The guard did as he was asked, scaling the tree and cutting the apple from the topmost branch. As soon as the knife passed through the stem, the tree began to wither. By the time the guard reached the ground, the leaves had begun to turn bright red, drying and falling from the tree. The apples shriveled, rotting on their branches, filling the square with a sweet, fetid odor. The branches themselves turned brittle and fell heavily to the ground, one by one, until only a staff remained, then it too toppled and fell.

The crowd gasped, and Ayzik let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The Prince called for the sorcerer to be brought to him, but soon the guards came rushing back, ashen-faced. They had found the sorcerer dead where they had left him.

"What evil magic is this?" the Prince asked.

"Only the sorcerer's own. Whoever undertakes to perform magic puts his life at risk, for every wonder created contains a portion of the life of him who creates it, and each has a weakness that can be its undoing. When a spell is broken, that piece of life goes with it. In this case, the apple from the top of the tree was that weakness. The sorcerer had used great power to work this spell, and the price he paid was just as high."

"Then you have slain my sorcerer." The Prince stood with his hands flat on the table, every muscle tense. His face was white with fear and anger. "Tell me why I should not have you slain for this crime."

"I?" Rabbi Meltzer paced in front of the table, addressing all the nobles there as well as the crowd itself, who waited with hushed expectancy. "Was it I who set the task? No, I spoke in favor of keeping the tree. It was the sorcerer himself who set the task, and you yourself who commanded, on pain of my life, that I obey. I tell you now, there was no way to undo the spell while the sorcerer yet lived. And it was not even I who ended the sorcerer's life. It was Ayzik who showed me the branch I needed and your own guard who cut the apple from the top of the tree, thus ending the sorcerer's life. Will you punish him also?"

The crowd was silent, taking in the rabbi's words. The nobles too spoke among themselves. Ayzik watched them closely, seeing a final glimmer of hope. He took a step forward to stand by the rabbi's side, giving what support he could although he doubted the rabbi needed his help. Still, it felt good to stand by him, to be proud to be a Jew.

At last the Prince spoke. "Then by your own admission, you performed no magic. It was the guard who caused the spell to fail, not you. You didn't win the contest at all."

Rabbi Meltzer shrugged. "You are right. What could I have been thinking, challenging so great a mage? Of course I concede defeat, and I will trouble your court no more. Come, Ayzik, we will leave these good people alone."

Rabbi Meltzer turned his back on the Prince and, taking Ayzik by the hand, led him through the crowd. The crowd was still, staring at the small rabbi as he passed them by. People moved aside to let them pass, a sea of faces, angry, bewildered, or amused. Ayzik waited for the sound of the Prince ordering their arrest, for someone to stop them, but they walked unhindered through the crowd. Ayzik passed through as if in a daze until his eyes fell upon the face of his wife.

She was standing near the back of the crowd. Her eyes were red from crying, for real this time. She stared at Ayzik as a rabbit stares at a fox. He froze as well. Rabbi Meltzer stood quietly by, saying nothing.

"I'm glad you're alive," she said at last, staring at the ground.

"Why?" Ayzik took a step toward her, unsure whether he wanted to embrace her or shake her.

"I don't know." Her tears came freely now, and her voice rose as she lost control. She turned to flee, repeating, "I'm sorry, so sorry," over and over until her voice faded in the distance.

Rabbi Meltzer took Ayzik by the arm and led him from the marketplace in silence.

They walked until they were well away from the noise and bustle of the market, walking in silence through the quiet streets until they found themselves at the door to the very tavern where Rabbi Meltzer had first given his warning.

"Thank you," Ayzik spoke at last.

A small white horse, outfitted for a journey, stood near the side of the road just beyond the tavern door. Rabbi Meltzer turned to mount the horse. "Do not thank me; thank the Lord. Your challenges are just beginning, remember to keep him near."

"What shall I do now?" Ayzik asked.

"Go back to the market, take up your profession."

"But what about my wife and partners?"

Rabbi Meltzer turned his horse around, for once looking down on Ayzik. "Your partners were led astray by their greed and the wiles of the sorcerer, as were many before them. They will trouble you no more. If one day they would be reconciled to you, simply ask them who was responsible for the plot to take your life. If they put all the blame on the sorcerer, then send them away. But if they put the blame on themselves for believing his lies, then you may accept them back into your life."

The rabbi was silent for a while. "As for your wife, you will have to decide. She has done a great wrong, and you would be within your rights to put her away publicly. But perhaps you too have done her wrong in the past, nothing so great but in small ways. You must decide if she deserves forgiveness."

Ayzik heard these words and knew that they were true. He bade Rabbi Meltzer a fond farewell.

"How can I ever repay you?" he asked as the rabbi urged his horse on.

"You have been doubly blessed by the Lord. First in your prosperity, and then in your need. If you would give thanks, then bless others as he has blessed you. Be generous and just; I require no other thanks."

Ayzik watched him go, then turned back towards the market. As he went, he passed a poor Jew asking for alms. The man was dressed roughly, fresh from the country. Ayzik reached for a coin, remembering Rabbi Meltzer's parting words, then stopped and looked at the man closer. His face was eager, honest—perhaps a little naive.

Ayzik pulled his hand from his pocket and took the man by the arm, leading him toward the market. "I'm a little short-handed right now, perhaps you could help. How much do you know about cloth?"

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FICTION

Kiet and the Drive-by

Gary Alexander



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/98

Bamsan Kiet hitched his shoulders and pivoted his left foot on his heel. He lowered his arm, simultaneously backswinging. He took two lurching steps to the foul line and released the ball. It thudded toward the pins, angled to the right, and clipped the six, nine, and ten.

Kiet trudged to his chair, thankful that he had avoided the ignominy of a gutter ball.

Captain Binh slapped his hand, a peculiar gesture he called High Five. "No sweat, superintendent. That's a do-able spare."

Kiet sat down heavily, swigged Golden Tiger beer from the bottle, and said, "For you, perhaps."

Kiet was superintendent of police of Hickorn, the Kingdom of Luong's capital and major city. Binh was his second in command, his adjutant. He marked Kiet's three pins on the score-sheet and said, "Dare I mention that you-know-what is within your grasp? In all due respect, superintendent, that weird boogie-woogie you do before you go forward—"

Kiet interrupted Binh with a scowl.

"But then, well hey, we all have our wiggly little rituals. The important thing is, you're focused. You've got the flow, you got momentum."

Kiet glanced at the scoresheet. On the unlikely basis of four consecutive strikes, he had one hundred seventy-nine in the eighth frame. Despite the pathetic three-pin toss, he was in unthinkable

territory: a two hundred game. His first two games of the match had had more typical scores of ninety-nine and one ten. His league average for the Hickorn Police Department bowling team was one hundred seven.

Two hundred! The prospect was electrifying.

The pin boy had finished clearing the fallen pins. Kiet returned to the line, thinking abstractly of focus, flow, and momentum. He hitched his shoulders, pivoted his left foot on his heel, and lurched ahead. He moaned, then covered his eyes to avoid seeing his ball bounce leftward and into the gutter.

"No sweat, superintendent, one eighty-two after eight is way awesome," Binh said.

A bowler for tonight's opposition, Healthful Pharmacy, made a spare.

Captain Binh was up. He towed his hands and held the ball aloft in deep concentration.

Even the lad's bowling shirt was immaculately pressed, Kiet marveled.

In his white uniform Binh was lean and fit and starched. His patent leather shoes and holster could be used as mirrors, and the three gold captain's pips on his shoulder boards gleamed like nuggets.

A meaty widower of middle age, Kiet was a shambling contrast in slacks, shirt, and sandals. Kiet and Binh worked together closely. They were often mistaken for father and son, though it was assumed Binh had been adopted.

Binh rolled an effortless strike.

Thanks to natural talent and a head start bowling with cop buddies during a year's training with the District of Columbia police constabulary, Binh was not only Luong's best bowler, he was her first.

The young adjutant averaged an incredible one eighty-nine and had a two seventy-seven high game, two seventy-seven out of an astronomically perfect three hundred. Binh's athletic prowess had elevated the Hickorn Police Department to second place in the Hickorn Major League, behind Luong Telephone.

"Cool. It's clinched, in the bag. We're in like Flynn," Binh said, raising a fist. "Bring on Telephone. Tomorrow night we're gonna eat their lunch. The night after is the last match of the season, against Dharramadacetyu Buddhist Temple, and they're pathetic."

The final three matches of the season had been accelerated to three consecutive nights due to the impending monsoon season. Most new construction in Hickorn had leaky roofs, and there was no reason why Hickorn Lanes should be an exception.

But why would I wish to eat a bowling opponent's lunch, especially in the heat of an evening match? Kiet wondered.

Besides useless forensics methodology for equipment the Hickorn Police Department did not have, Binh had also brought home inscrutable criminal justice terminology such as "alleged" and

"appeal." With the excess baggage of futuristic police techniques came habitual Western slang. It was so sad, Kiet thought. Twelve months in the United States of America had crippled the lad's ability to speak clear Luongan.

Kiet signaled a waitress for more beer. Whether his two hundred-game dream came true or not, this Hickorn Lanes gathering would be as pleasurable as any, the dense atmosphere of cigarette smoke and sweaty feet notwithstanding. The bowling alley had been the brainchild of American expatriates who realized that Luongans were no different from Westerners who wished to participate in a sport that required no exertion.

Hickorn Lanes had become a male bastion where participants could practice an illusion of physical fitness while drinking beer and eating greasy snack food. The expats were contemplating investing their ample profits in the outdoor equivalent: Luong's first golf course.

"You're up, superintendent," Binh said. Kiet snapped out of his daydream of bowling glory and picked up his ball. "Superintendent, remember. Focus, flow, momentum. I don't mean to put any pressure on you, but if you blow the ninth, you gotta roll a spare in the tenth. Don't worry, though. It's only a game."

"Indeed not, no pressure," Kiet said, feeling a squadron of butterflies launch in his stomach.

A uniformed Hickorn Police

Department officer quickstepped from the entrance to Binh and whispered in his ear. Binh's eyes widened and he replied, "*¡Ay, caramba!*"

Kiet went to the line. He hitched his shoulders and pivoted his left foot on his heel.

Binh took his elbow. "Superintendent, there's been a situation." Kiet lowered his arm. Binh held on, checking his backswing. "A super serious situation, superintendent."

"Can it not wait a few moments, captain?"

"Sorry. But hey, the match's almost over. We'll still claim the win."

My two hundred game, Kiet thought desperately. "I do not recall that provision in the rules. What if the pharmacists protest and demand that we forfeit?"

"Hell, then we'll arrest them. We gotta haul tail to the Conti, superintendent. There's been a drive-by."

Kiet sighed and replaced his ball. Although Bamsan Kiet did not know what Binh meant by a "drive-by," although Luong was not really a Southeast Asian backwater surrounded by Laos, Burma, China, and Thailand, although Hickorn was not a teeming city of two hundred thirty thousand on the toxic and languid Ma San River, he nevertheless felt a sense of duty.

Kiet clung to Binh on an HPD scooter as they hurtled through darkened streets. Binh was an automotive enthusiast who had

developed homicidal driving habits on American freeways. Taped to his office walls beside centerfolds of pneumatic starlets in bikinis were posters of Porsches and Ferraris. Binh had wrecked the last two HPD staff cars, and there were no funds for replacements.

Kiet pondered whether riding with Binh was more frightening at night or during the day. He gave daytime terror a slight edge. At night he would have less notice when he was slated to join his ancestors.

They passed so close to a pedal-driven produce cart that Kiet could smell overripe papayas. He closed his eyes and shouted, "Captain, what, please, is a drive-by?"

"Drive-by shooting, superintendent. This'll be Hickorn's first. Happens all the time in the States."

"An individual drives an automobile in the vicinity of another individual and fires a gun at him?"

"Yeah. In America everybody's armed."

Kiet's opened his eyes, squinting into the slipstream. "Every United States of America citizen owns a firearm?"

"It's the law, superintendent. That's a known fact."

"Why such an absurd ordinance?"

"Think about it. If somebody shoots at you, you have the capability of returning fire and blowing him away. This deters violence."

They slalomed along an array of obstacles that included star-

tled pedestrians, bicycles, and the occasional motor-powered vehicle. Kiet's shirtsleeve grazed a cluster of slit-skirted prostitutes. He glimpsed cleavage and whiffed jasmine. "Captain, watch the road, not the ladies. Speak to me of this shooting."

"It's bizarre, superintendent."

"Certainly it is."

"Well, details are sketchy, superintendent. All the uniforms know is that they were having an Elvis impersonator contest. I'm assuming there's at least one DOA, a Vietnamese. He was on the *terrasse* bandstand singing when an unknown perp drove by and allegedly sprayed the place with a machine gun. Elvis Nguyen's the victim, dead as a door-nail. The targets were apparently him and the other Elvises, who were together at a table. We gotta assume they're included in the body count."

Kiet knew of Nguyen, a noted Vietnamese lounge performer who mimicked the American musical idol who might or might not also be deceased. He groaned, already weary of the cosmopolitan makeup of the incident. Foreigner involvement in Luongan crime always promised headaches.

Located at the intersection of Rue Ho Chi Minh and Avenue Juan Perón, the Hickorn Continental was Luong's finest hotel. Constructed seventy years ago by absentee Frenchmen and owned by their absentee descendants, the Conti boasted what travel pamphlets termed a "sleepy colonial ambiance." Below three

floors of rooms was the *terrasse*, an open-air bar and restaurant. Through the decades, in wicker chairs, sipping aperitifs, dreamers and hustlers had whispered their deals, lying in twenty languages.

Binh stopped and the agnostic Kiet dismounted, thanking every deity in every pantheon for permitting him to survive the journey. The *terrasse* swarmed with police officers, medical technicians, and the ghoulishly curious. A banner draped above the *terrasse* announced:

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EAST ASIAN
ELVIS IMPERSONATOR
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Kiet's deepest secret was his aversion to gore. Should it become known that Luong's top cop fell ill at the sight of bloodshed, his career would be destroyed. He would be deemed a sissy. Child pickpockets would laugh in his face, and old men in opium dens would spit in it.

He imagined entering the *terrasse*, blood sloshing in his sandals, then vomiting and fainting in the arms of Captain Binh, his replacement as superintendent. No, thank you. Kiet subtly allowed Binh to lead the way as he scanned the surrounding area for clues.

While thinking of Hickorn Lanes, he observed officers digging a vertical pattern of bullets

out of the Conti's stuccoed outer walls. Surely other bowlers had already usurped their lane, his remarkable and incomplete score-sheet discarded, his brush with semi-greatness erased, obliterated, forgotten.

Binh interviewed HPD officers and reported to Kiet. Referring to a notebook, he said, "Superintendent, there's been a slight exaggeration as far as casualties are concerned. There aren't any."

The medical technicians had seemed inactive, Kiet noticed—a spot of good fortune for the prospective wounded. "No DOA body counts?"

"Nope," Binh said, pointing at the bullet removal process. "See how the rounds are stitched up the wall from the pillar to the second floor? Well, eyewitnesses agree that the perp drove by on a scooter and cut loose with a MAC-10 or some such boxlike assault weapon, and what happened was that he was firing one-handed and couldn't control the kick, so the weapon's recoil walked the slugs right on up the building, which is why the intended victims can thank their lucky stars the drive-by shooter was incompetent."

Binh and the vast rapid-fire sentences he uttered when agitated, Kiet thought. He had contracted the habit in America, infected by excessive quantities of ambition, hyperbole, and caffeine.

"Captain, we do not have America's mandatory gun laws. Machine guns are illegal and un-

heard of in Hickory streets. Where would it come from?"

"Beats me, superintendent. I'll tell you what, in the States the drive-by dudes blast away with nothing but the best."

"Do we know who the intended victims were?"

"We're fairly sure."

Binh gestured at a table occupied by three men with long oily sideburns and tight metallic jumpsuits.

"Those are the contestants who were waiting their turns. Elvis Nguyen was numeral uno on the schedule. The estimated line of fire would have taken them all out. Obviously the perp has no Stateside drive-by experience. They hardly ever miss, even if it's an innocent party caught in the crossfire."

"Who are the Elvis people, please?"

"Elvis Truong, whom we both know, and Elvis Poe and Elvis Poe."

"Excuse me, captain, did you stutter?"

"Negative. They're twins from the U.S. South. Lanny and Manny Poe. They claim they've actually been to Graceland like twenty times."

"The *Mind* is the sponsor. Is this an important competition?"

"Between you and me, it's kind of dorky and third-rate. Elvis Nguyen's probably the pick of the litter. Most everybody's stuck around and the *terrasse* is still half empty. Not what you'd call a full house. Because Luongans read the *Mind*, they know Elvis,

and they won't settle for anything but the very best."

Indeed, Kiet thought. The lurid tabloid was Luong's bestselling paper. The Hickorn *Enquiring Mind's* standard fare included UFO's, promiscuous celebrities, and of course the speculative fate of Elvis Presley. Along with numerous Luongans Kiet was a secret fan of the *Mind*, a closet reader. He particularly enjoyed flying saucer abductions of earthlings, although he felt the kinky alien sex could be handled less graphically.

"I'll have to take your word for that, captain. Was prize money offered?"

"Five hundred thousand Luongan zin, which is about four hundred dollars U.S., nothing to write home about but nothing to sneeze about either. The *Mind* paid travel expenses and put the out-of-towners up at the Conti, which had to cost some moola."

"Nguyen is Vietnamese and the Poes are American. Who is Elvis Truong?"

"We know him as TeeVee Truong, superintendent."

"How does the Elvis impersonation contest pertain to TeeVee Truong? He sells cut-rate televisions and computers and appliances."

Binh said, "Isn't he a dork? Don't you hate his TV commercials? Those discounts are in your dreams. I've heard horror stories from customers who came out of TeeVee Truong's Warehouse of Electronics with their pockets turned inside out. Truong

takes trades, too, another means of bamboozling the consumer. I don't know what his agenda is as far as the Elvis situation is concerned."

"Can the eyewitnesses describe the drive-at individual?"

"Drive-by, superintendent. This is where it gets weird. The Elvises and the few people in the crowd who saw him are unanimous. The shooter was another Elvis. Go figure, huh?"

Kiet suppressed a groan. "Shall we interview the Elvises we have, captain?"

They sat down with Truong and the Poes. TeeVee Truong was all too familiar, even in greasy paste-on sideburns and sequined bell-bottomed clothing. One could scarcely tune in Luong's only television channel without being assaulted by TeeVee Truong's Warehouse of Electronics advertising. The spots starred Truong himself affixing low-low-low price stickers to his merchandise. The appliance dealer was Kiet's age with slicked-back hair and the nose and eyes of a raptor.

The Poes were beefy and thirtyish with watery blue eyes and the Caucasian skin disease known as freckles.

"I didn't see his face, but he was definitely trying to kill us," TeeVee Truong said.

"We was concentrating on Elvis Nguyen," Lanny Poe said.

"He was doing 'All Shook Up,'" Manny Poe said, jerking his head to an unheard rhythm. "He ain't bad."

"Fair to middlin'," said Lanny

Poe. "The shooter, I didn't catch his face neither, just the backside of him. His gun and guitar straps was crossed like them bandoieers."

"A large, small, or medium-sized shooter?"

"Small, I reckon. He was gone at the blink of an eye."

"Is there no sibling Elvis rivalry?" Kiet asked the twins.

"Nah," Lanny said. "Manny wins some, I win some. Some we don't win nohow."

"Jest having fun, seeing the world," Manny said.

"A new career for you, Mr. Truong?" Kiet asked.

TeeVee Truong laughed. "Oh no. Elvis singing is merely a new hobby. This is a friendly competition with low stakes. I am honored to be in the company of gentlemen as talented as the Poes and Mr. Nguyen."

"It wasn't too friendly to the Elvis in question," Binh said. "Was there a prelim competition where somebody was cut?"

"No," said the Poes in unison.

"I suggest you ask a representative of the *Mind*," Truong said. "They're running the show."

"Excellent idea," Kiet said, looking around.

"No can do, superintendent. They've all taken their photos and notes back to the paper, to make the story tomorrow's lead."

Kiet thanked the men for their cooperation. Binh told them not to leave town. Kiet and Binh walked to a small bandstand near the bar and stood under hot lights.

"Captain, if the Elvises and the audience were watching Mr. Nguyen, is it not logical that Mr. Nguyen was looking outward and perhaps saw the shooting occur?"

"Hey, yeah, right."

"And did he? We shall ask him."

Binh fiddled with the microphone as he swiveled his head. "I think we have a problem, superintendent. Uniforms ordered Elvis Nguyen to stay put until we could talk to him, but it looks like he bugged out on us."

Avenue Alexandre Loubet honored the nineteenth century priest who romanized the Luong language. The Chineselike ideograms were incomprehensible and therefore pagan.

The address of the Hickory Police Department was 900 Avenue Loubet. Constructed of bulky, unembellished stucco, the building had served for half a century as barracks and offices for legionnaires. Its interior remained cold and spare, unchanged from the days of French colonial rule. Boots on hallway tile resonated. The place reeked of history and nervous perspiration.

Bamsan Kiet could at times almost hear the voices of men long dead—arrogant banter and commands, and toward the end of French hegemony in Indochina, the quiet sounds of relief at being posted in Luong rather than Vietnam. Kiet liked the purposeful message his headquarters gave to his officers and their reluctant guests.

Next morning Kiet trudged in-

to his headquarters attempting to refocus on the drive-through case and his other duties. A persistent dream had denied him sleep except in brief fits. He dreamt that his bowling ball had been diverted from its strong, straight path to the pins by the push of a cold wind. The icy breeze would howl through Hickorn Lanes just as his ball reached the head pin, blowing it into a gutter. His score was an invariable one ninety-nine.

Binh was already there, clustered around the front desk with uniformed officers. He saw Kiet and said, "He's whipping his John Hancock on the guys, superintendent."

Kiet yawned. He hadn't the energy for Binh's syntax, particularly when it sounded vaguely obscene. "Who? What?"

"Elvis Nguyen," Binh said. "You probably can't see him in that mob. They're getting his autograph."

"Where did you find him?"

"He found us. Go figure. Walked in ten minutes ago."

At the sight of their superintendent the autographing session broke up. Binh and Kiet escorted Nguyen into Kiet's office. The singer was plumper than most Luongans. His obligatory glossy hair and long sideburns looked real. He wore a metallic jumpsuit with frayed cuffs and carried a guitar slung over a shoulder.

Kiet gestured to him. "You are giving a performance soon?"

"Nah," Nguyen said with a pe-

culiar facial tic. "I always dress like I'm on a gig. I live the role."

"Nguyen has the King's voice and sneer down pat, doesn't he, superintendent?"

Kiet said, "Where did you go last night?"

"I didn't know you needed me, man."

"Were you not asked to remain until we could interview you?"

Nguyen shrugged.

"Coulda been. My Luongan ain't too good."

"You were performing at the Conti last night when the shooting occurred. What did you see, please?"

"I was on the last bar of 'Don't Be Cruel' when I saw the flashing—what do you call 'em, man?"

"Muzzle flashes," Binh said.

"Yeah. From the street. Everybody hit the deck."

"How many flashes?"

"Just one big pulsating burst, like twenty shots or so as he was going by."

"Describe the 'he,'" Binh said.

"It was dark. I mainly saw the scooter."

"Describe the scooter."

"It was a scooter, man, ridden by a big guy. Bigger than the Poes."

Kiet muttered a thank you. Binh dismissed Nguyen and said not to leave town.

"Captain, did you detect inconsistencies between last night's report and Elvis Nguyen's statement?"

Binh nodded. "The size of the perp and the tunes. A size discrepancy is understandable considering the distance and the

speed of the scooter. But the song? C'mon. Get real."

"Indeed. I forget the titles other than they were different."

"Yeah. 'All Shook Up.' Now he says 'Don't Be Cruel.' There's a helluva difference. One's up-tempo. The other's slower, with overtones of a ballad."

"The relevant difference is time."

Binh furrowed his brow.

"Right. Unless he was singing them both at once, you know, like a medley, which he wasn't, he gets his songs mixed up and voluntarily appears this morning with contradictory information but states that he did not know his report was needed last night, so if you ask me, he's been rehearsing more than 'Jailhouse Rock,' but with who and how do we account for his confusion?"

"We do not. We go to the keeper of enlightenment, captain. The press."

Prince Novisad Pakse, octogenarian ruler of the Kingdom of Luong, did not enjoy a strong military or a robust economy. Lacking the leverage of guns or butter with which to impose a foreign policy, Prince Pakse relied on neutrality and psychology and hoped for the best.

Specifically, he named and renamed Hickorn streets to honor or dishonor political leaders, dead or alive, whose nations had or had not done something for Luong lately. For instance, redesignation of Avenue Chiang Kai-Shek to Avenue Deng Xiaoping had stimulated a foreign aid ship-

ment from Beijing that included bus carburetors, pith helmets, and soy sauce.

In Kiet's respectful opinion, His Royal Highness was occasionally guilty of lapses in this procedure. The inscrutable Richard Milhous Nixon had for decades graced the boulevard leading from the city to Hickorn International Airport. Kiet could only surmise that the late American president's self-rehabilitation campaigns had erratically swirled the political winds into which Prince Pakse raised a wetted finger.

Richard Nixon Boulevard was fast filling with a mercantile wasteland Binh termed "strip malls." In the sprawl of shops, teriyaki shacks, and used car dealerships was the Hickorn *Enquiring Mind*.

The *Mind's* publishing plant and editorial offices occupied a former Chinese restaurant. The newspaper, in need of expansion from its cramped downtown location, had bought it for a distressed price after publishing a series of articles exposing cannibalistic practices in the kitchen. The restaurant owner sued for libel, but litigation was dropped when the *Mind* revealed that he was, despite being thirty-seven years old and ethnic Chinese, a Nazi war criminal whose resettlement in Luong involved time travel. Intimidated by public outrage, the owner accepted the newspaper's offer and moved to Kuala Lumpur.

Kiet and Binh asked the recep-

tionist at the former cashier counter for the person in charge of the Elvis competition and were directed to a cubicle that had once been a booth. A petite and serious young woman in slacks and blouse greeted them. "I am the Dragon Lady," she said. "I'm most glad for your prompt visit. Have you arrested the man who ruined our contest?"

The Dragon Lady was their chief correspondent and an officer in the corporation. Her byline always appeared on page one under bold headlines. Kiet slid into cracked and taped vinyl and said, "Not yet. Perhaps you can assist in that regard. Give us some history on the competition, please."

"What is there to give? You read our paper, don't you?"

Kiet fondly remembered her piece on the seven-foot-tall female Alpha Centaurians and the bondage aspect of their culture. "No, I am sorry, I do not."

"We advertised in major newspapers of the region. The Elvises came to sing. Instead, they were shot at and nearly killed."

Binh peered around a computer terminal at her. "Did every Elvis who applied appear at the Conti?"

"Yes."

"No disgruntled Elvises eliminated in pre-contest screening?"

"No."

"Okay, so how do we reconcile the fact that the shooter was also an Elvis?"

"You tell me," the Dragon Lady said, frowning. "You are the police."

Her hard glare wilted Binh, who asked less stridently, "Well, um, who was judging the Elvises?"

"I was."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you witness the drive-by?"

"I heard the gunfire. It happened very quickly."

"I do not recall seeing you last night at the aftermath," Kiet said.

"Thanks to that maniac, I had a story to write and a deadline to meet. The wire services have been ringing our phones off the hook when they've worked."

"Luong Telephone really sucks," Binh said.

Kiet asked, "Does anything else occur to you that would further our investigation?"

"Just a word of advice. Do your job. This debacle is costing us a fortune and is soiling our journalistic reputation. Solve the crime!"

"What is your opinion on the level of competition last night?" Kiet asked.

She hesitated. "Adequate."

Binh said, "Hey, I was wondering, will the *Mind* ever have a sports section?"

"You haven't been paying attention. We do Dennis Rodman stories."

On the way out they picked up a complimentary copy of the *Mind* in a rack next to the cigarette machine and an empty fortune cookie bowl. Binh said, "The Dragon Lady's one tough little yuppette. What's your take on her?"

Kiet turned through the tab-

loid, noting that the shooting was splashed all over the front page, relegating "LECHEROUS EXTRATERRESTRIAL CRUISES SINGLES BARS, VOWS TO FATHER EARTHLING BABY" to the inside. "She was defensive. Not forthcoming."

"That's an understatement. Think she's hiding something?"

"Possibly. She seemed strained."

"Well, her job's probably on the line after this fiasco."

Kiet folded the paper to a full-page advertisement for TeeVee Truong's Warehouse of Electronics. Truong and his barracuda-like smile, in guitared, swivel-hipped Elvis regalia, centered a starburst of merchandise. The caption teased: "UNLESS YOU COME ON DOWN FOR FABULOUS BARGAINS, YOU AIN'T NOTHING BUT A HOUND DOG."

"Is Truong a major *Mind* advertiser, captain?"

"Uh, I wouldn't know. I never read that rag."

"Perhaps we should ask him."

Binh agreed. "It wouldn't hurt to jerk his chain."

His Royal Highness Prince No-visad Pakse enjoyed above all else the game of pocket billiards. Often he flew to nearby capitals, cloaked his bony frame in a tuxedo, and competed in nine-ball tournaments with important personages. Atop the Luongan Royal Palace was a satellite dish that plucked signals from foreign telecasts. Prince Pakse's favorite was an American all-sports network that covered billiards matches.

So appreciative was His Royal

Highness that he named a Hickorn street for the network, and it was on Rue ESPN that TeeVee Truong sold marked-down televisions, personal computers, and stereos. His Warehouse of Electronics was not a warehouse at all, but rather two haphazard shop floors crammed with stock, including an area crammed with used items taken in trade, which Binh referred to as "the mother of all yard sales."

To entice customers, banks of televisions flickered in the windows and waves of rock music blasted out to the sidewalk. Kiet grimaced at the shrieking of a Western female vocalist.

"Michael Jackson," Binh said, bobbing his head and snapping his fingers. "The king of disco rap."

TeeVee Truong greeted them with a jittery smile and a question. "Is our would-be killer locked up?"

"Perhaps soon." Kiet held up the advertisement. "Is this part of your newfound hobby?"

Truong's smile vanished. "Is a fresh ad campaign against the law? Sales have been down."

"Not that we're aware of, Truong," Binh said, affecting an Elvisesque sneer. "Not yet. Just give us a little time."

"What is he implying, Kiet?"

Kiet was getting into the chain-jerking spirit. "Somebody must know who the drive-in shooting Elvis is."

"Drive-by, superintendent. We are talking obstruction of justice, Truong. Do yourself a favor and tell us everything you know about

that dog-and-pony show last night."

"I have nothing further to say until I speak to my attorney."

Kiet groaned. He had finally broken Binh of the annoying practice of reading his Miranda warning card to suspects, informing them of rights they did not possess. Hickorn lawyers seemed to be multiplying, however, an infestation Binh blamed on Luong's recent inclusion in the Global Community.

"No shyster can save you if you're in a conspiracy to waste our time," Binh warned with a wagging finger.

"Nobody's entitled to waste our time except us," an outraged Binh said on the scooter. "This situation smells funnier and funnier. Somebody's manipulating us. You just don't pull a drive-by and not even wing anyone. It isn't done."

"A firearm was illegally and aggressively discharged in the city," Kiet conceded.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not saying it isn't serious. I'm just wondering, you know, if it's real."

"A staged event? For what purpose?"

"Truong didn't buy our bluff. Maybe the Poe twins will."

The Conti desk clerk told Kiet and Binh that the Poes had not checked out but had an hour earlier ordered a taxi to take them to the airport. They were carrying luggage. The Poes had informed him that they were playing a one-nighter in Bangkok

and would be back tomorrow. The clerk was concerned and was about to check the room himself, as it had not been paid for in advance by the *Mind*.

"Whip a passkey on us," Binh said. "We'll save you the trouble."

Kiet and Binh entered a room filthy with the remains of room service food and drink scattered everywhere. At a glance, nothing that belonged to Lanny and Manny Poe remained.

"Oink," Binh said as they began a search of the closet and dressers. Still nothing.

Then Binh lifted a mattress and said, "Oh my God, superintendent!" Underneath was a compact rifle with a short barrel attached to a boxlike frame.

"A MAC-10 less the clip," Binh said, sniffing the muzzle. "Recently fired. Five'll get you ten this is the drive-by weapon."

"Captain, how could the Poe twins have fired drive-to bullets at themselves?"

"Triplets?" Binh said.

Kiet looked at him.

Hickorn International Airport's passenger terminal, a tiered stucco affair, was lettered *H CKO N* on the Nixon Boulevard side. While air traffic was not dense, the facility was indeed international, as the only practical way out of landlocked Luong was up.

Air traffic was customarily slow. Within minutes Kiet and Binh were able to check the ticket counters.

Two Royal Air Luong domestic

flights had departed since dawn, no foreigners aboard either. They caught the Poes boarding the only scheduled international flight of the day, the weekly shuttle to Bangkok.

Kiet and Binh commandeered a taxi and returned to HPD headquarters with Lanny and Manny Poe.

In their interrogation room, within smell and earshot of the jail wing, Kiet asked the twins to please speak freely.

"If we do, you gonna turn us loose?" Manny Poe asked, glancing toward the source of the noise and odor. "We ain't done nothing."

"Yes, you'll be free to go," Kiet said. "You have my promise."

"We was having lunch in our room when we got this call," Lanny Poe said. "You got some folks going mental next door, you know."

"It flat freaked us out," Manny said. "Said he was Elvis. Sounded just like him. 'Heartbreak Hotel' was playing in the back-ground."

"The King said we oughtta go look under the mattress," Lanny said.

"We seen the gun there," Manny said. "Then he said maybe he was gonna call the cops on us or maybe he was gonna take another shot at us and this time not miss."

"He said he hadn't decided yet."

"So we split before he did."

"That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" Binh asked.

"Swear to God," the Poes said in unison. "Now can we go?"

"Okay, let's summarize the case," Binh said in Kiet's office after they had jailed the Poes pending further investigation and possible charges. "A drive-by wise-guy decked out as Elvis pops a few caps, and all he does is property damage and spoil the contest, except all the Elvises are the intended victims who get lucky and the weapon's found in the room of two of them who try to vamoose in spite of me ordering them not to leave town, while TeeVee Truong makes hay and the Dragon Lady stews in her juices if she has any."

"The portion I comprehended is essentially correct, captain. The Poes are Americans, so it is not unreasonable that they were in possession of the firearm. Perhaps we should consider having them licensed."

"Guns?"

"As well as performing Elvises."

"What we have here is pretty much a victimless crime that's spinning out of control, except I have a feeling I can't quite pin down that somebody's eventually gonna make out like a bandit, and somebody's gonna get it in the neck."

The case was giving Kiet a headache. He yawned. "Well, it's late in the day," Binh said. "I suggest you take a little siesta, superintendent. Some rest will improve your bowling. Not to put any pressure on you, but the squad

has to roll a super series if we're gonna knock off Luong Telephone."

Kiet got up and went home. Occasionally the lad did give good advice.

Kiet hitched his shoulders and pivoted his left foot on his heel. He rolled a wobbly ball that toppled four pins to the left of the head pin. He sat down heavily and swigged Golden Tiger beer from the bottle.

"Superintendent, we're neck and neck with Telephone. Not to put any pressure on you, but you gotta avoid the Brooklyn side."

Luong Telephone Company stood between the Hickorn Police Department and a vulgar trophy Kiet ached to display at headquarters. Every Telephone bowler was superior to his HPD counterpart with the exception of Binh, whose average led the Hickorn Major League by twenty pins.

Luong Telephone's bowling was far superior to their telephones, a system the French had installed before Luong achieved independence in 1954. The major improvement since had been inflationary instead of technological—modification of pay phone slots to accept larger denomination coins. It was simpler to dial Greenland than across the street.

"Thank you for not applying any pressure, captain."

"Focus. Flow. Momentum," Binh said. "Don't worry, though. It's only a game."

Kiet rolled, for him, a respectable ninety-nine/one twenty-six/one eleven series. An encore run

at a two hundred game seemed not a remote possibility. Kiet likened his flirtation with semi-greatness to a brief encounter with a beautiful woman who was never to be seen again, and to a subsequent lifetime of sweet memories and melancholy.

Binh was superb. Their HPD teammates bowled well, and two of them celebrated high games. The HPD narrowly defeated Telephone, tying them in the win-loss standings, and HPD enjoyed the tiebreaker: a slim lead in total pins. Middling scores and a victory tomorrow night against the woebegone Dharramadacetyu Buddhist Temple virtually guaranteed the championship.

In the lobby Binh said giddily, "Whipping those dorky monks will be like taking candy from a baby."

Kiet bought the latest issue of the *Enquiring Mind* from a machine, a bonus to the edition that normally came out in the mornings. The headline: "ELVIS ON HOMICIDAL RAMPAGE. FURIOUS AT AMATEURISH COPYCATS."

"Elvis kicking butt," Binh said. "Cool."

"Our chief suspect is perhaps a ghost? Highly doubtful, captain."

"Pardon me."

Kiet and Binh looked up from the paper at a man in jeans and T-shirt. He wore dark glasses, and his head was shaved.

"They told me at the police station where to find you," he continued.

"What can we do for you?"

"Protective custody."

"Your voice is familiar," Binh said. "Who the hell are you?"

He took off his glasses. "You know me as Elvis Nguyen."

At headquarters Nguyen told his story.

"I realized after I visited you that I got my version screwed up."

"All Shook Up' versus 'Don't Be Cruel,'" Binh said. "Hey, we're trained detectives. We caught it in a second, bub."

"That, too. I was rattled. I told you the shooter was big."

"He wasn't?"

"I don't know. Because of the bright lights on the bandstand, I couldn't see him or most of the audience either. When I heard that the Poes said he was small, I knew they were out to get me, them and Elvis."

"The Elvis?" Kiet said.

"According to her."

"Her?"

"The lady from the newspaper who rushed me up to my room right after the shooting so I'd be safe. That's why I didn't stick around. She said they'd try again."

"They? The Poes or Elvis?"

"They're working together. Don't you read the paper? The Poes've been to Graceland twenty times, you know. They're connected. This is the start of a worldwide campaign by Elvis to eliminate fake Elvises, the lady said."

Kiet sighed.

"Is it the consensus among Elvis impersonators that the original is alive?"

Nguyen shrugged. "We're not

saying he is, we're not saying he ain't."

Binh said, "Stranger things have happened, superintendent."

"I panicked when I heard that the gun was found in their room, and went into hiding and disguise. I'll tell you, without the hair and grease my head is chilly."

"Does the representative of the newspaper have a name?" Kiet asked.

"She never gave it to me."

"Small gal, tough as nails?" Binh said. "Wears slacks instead of a dress?"

"That is her. She hasn't contacted me since."

"Surprise, surprise, superintendent. All we need is a motive."

"Are you going to protect me?"

Binh said, "Does the sun rise in the east?"

After they jailed Nguyen for his own protection, Kiet typed a note on the HPD booking typewriter, an ancient black Underwood as heavy as an anchor.

"Motivation," Kiet said, handing it to Binh.

"Conjecture, superintendent."

"Logical conjecture, captain."

Binh smiled. "Hey, I didn't say it wouldn't work."

Early next morning as Kiet and Binh skulked inconspicuously around the corner from TeeVee Truong's Warehouse of Electronics, they read the latest *Mind*. There had been a long line at the newsstand, and they'd gotten the last copy, a phenomenon Binh inscrutably dubbed "selling like hot-

cakes." The headline: "ELVIS LIVES! EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE KING."

"What a bunch of crapola," Binh said. "This picture of the King standing next to the Dragon Lady holding her notepad and pencil must be from the 1960's before he ballooned up. It looks fake, like those of the Abominable Snowman pasted in beside real people."

The Snowman a fake? Kiet said, "In the text Mr. Presley sounds vengeful."

"Yeah, he's had a bellyful of these losers capitalizing on his fame. Oops, superintendent, bogey at three o'clock."

The Dragon Lady dismounted from a motorbike and pounded loudly on Truong's door.

"There's a gal with an attitude," Binh said.

"We can hope."

She was admitted, and Binh checked his watch. "It's twenty past eight. I recommend ninety seconds max. We don't want anybody offed."

The police officers entered on Binh's schedule to a heated argument. "We're not open yet—you," TeeVee Truong said.

"Good morning," Kiet said. "Good morning, miss." The Dragon Lady did not return his greeting. "The door was unlocked, and you are rather loud. If you wish, we are available to mediate your dispute."

"Mind your own business," the Dragon Lady said.

"I'll come directly to the point. Truong, you confessed that elec-

tronics sales have been slack. Dragon Lady, your parsimonious prize money failed to attract elite Elvis impersonators. You stood to lose face and considerable money for your newspaper, so you created an event within an event. Truong, you perhaps were a silent partner with dreams of a successful advertising campaign. You cooperated subsequently in order to recoup your investment."

"All this junk you take in when people don't have cash," Binh said, "like those fridges and hedge trimmers and Lava lamps, I'll bet your scrap heap includes an illegal assault weapon once in a while. Like a MAC-10."

"I have nothing further to say until I speak to my attorney," said Truong. Binh laughed.

Kiet said, "Dragon Lady, did you intend to harm anyone?"

"Firing full automatic, that piece has to buck like a mule," Binh said.

She folded her arms and withered them with a glare.

"In the chaos it was easy for you to discard your costume, escort Nguyen upstairs, and stash the gun under a mattress in the Poe room. You reserved their rooms on behalf of your newspaper, so I imagine you had access to the keys and made copies."

"Idiotic guessing," she announced.

"Yeah. What brings you here at this hour in such a lather?"

Neither responded. Binh held up a photocopy of Kiet's typed note: "I am holding a press conference at TeeVee Truong's to-

morrow, nine A.M. Elvis (The King) Presley.”

“Read it and weep, kids. You bought our doublecross sting hook, line, and sinker, Dragon Lady. You thought Truong was gonna ace you out and grab the glory. Hire himself another Elvis and cosy up to competing papers, something along those lines.”

“A question, Dragon Lady,” said Kiet. “Did you intentionally miss the Elvises, or was your aim thrown off by the machine gun’s recoil?” She replied with the bardest trace of a smile.

Truong gulped and told her, “Honestly, I did not write that note. I did not betray you.”

“Shut up, you fool.”

“A damn ringer,” Binh said after rolling his last ball. “That’s what he is. We’re talking swindle, pure and simple.”

“Captain, look on the bright side. TeeVee Truong confessed in the presence of his lawyer. His testimony will convict the Dragon Lady, too. They will serve time for public endangerment. The Dragon Lady has already been fired by the *Mind*. When she is out of jail, she is going into seclusion to write a science fiction novel. In order to reduce his sentence Truong is donating office equipment to HPD, including the computer you have been nagging me to purchase. And the other Elvises are out of Luong and our hair.”

“Okay, but you have to admit

you’re disappointed about this situation.”

Kiet was. Their season-finale defeat by Dharramadacetyu Buddhist Temple had cost them the lovely and vulgar trophy for which he so yearned.

“We oughtta protest, superintendent.”

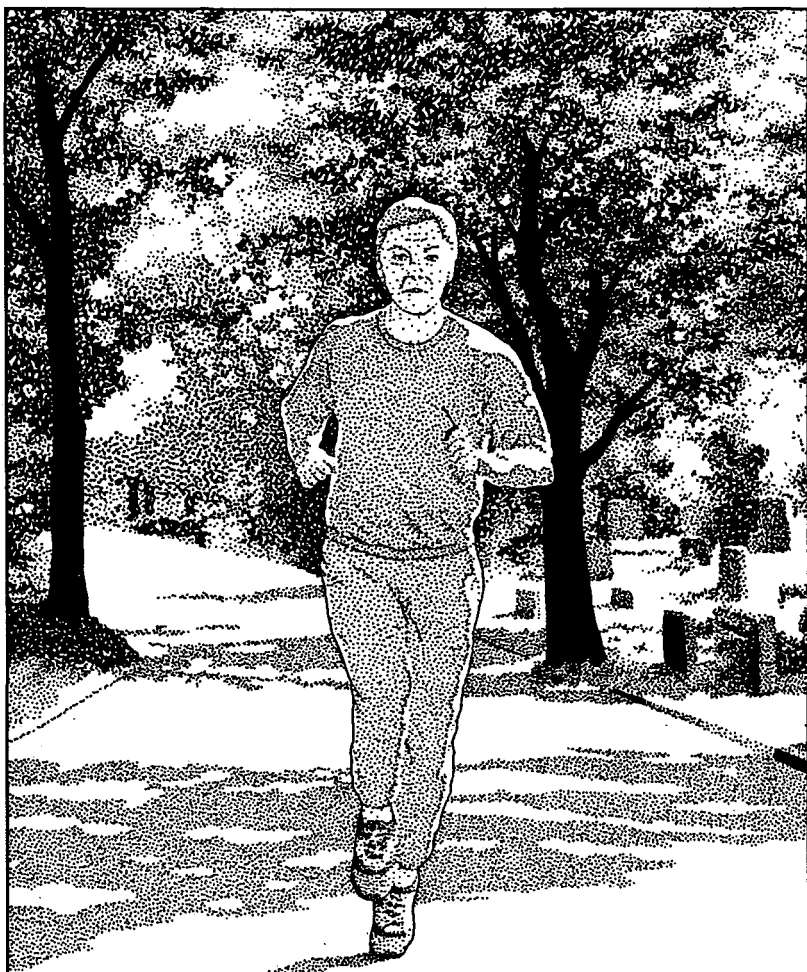
“The man is a legitimate member of their sect, captain.” While Kiet would never cease pining for his lost two hundred, tonight’s effort of one hundred twenty-six/one hundred four/one hundred ten marked the first time all three games in a league series had been in triple digits.

Thunder boomed. Lights flickered. Hickorn Lanes employees began setting out drip buckets.

“You can’t count on anything these days,” Binh went on. “This ringer, this phony baloney Brother Quoc, who is actually Bud Hoopsma of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, beer and bowling capital of the world, goes and rolls a two thirty-one/two eighty-three/two oh six—seven twenty that basically obliterates every Hickorn Major League record I hold, and lemme ask you this, superintendent, why would an average middle-class dude bag his American dream to shave his head and walk around in a saffron robe with an alms bowl—a lifestyle, me being Buddhist myself, I have to say sucks.”

Kiet took the deep breath Binh did not seem to require and said, “Don’t worry. It is only a game.”

FICTION



AND MAYBE THE HORSE WILL LEARN TO SING

Gregory Fallis

Illustration by Friedrich Haas

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/98

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"It's my husband," Chloe Stenning said. "He's . . . I think he's cheating on me."

Now that's a sad thing for a person to say out loud to a total stranger. Even if the stranger is a private detective.

And me . . . was I the least bit sympathetic? Did I feel even a lick of empathy? No, I wasn't, and no, I didn't. What I was thinking was this: I *hate* this work. I was thinking: I really hate Kevin Sweeney.

"Why do you think he's cheating on you?" I asked.

"Well, Mr. Wheeler . . ."

"Call me Joop," I said. No need to be formal. I mean, the woman was fessing up her deepest, darkest suspicions about her husband. I could let her call me by my name.

"Joop?" she asked. "Is that Dutch? I notice you have an accent."

I come from South Carolina. Which is separated from the Netherlands by a big chunk of the Atlantic Ocean. "Tell me about your husband," I said.

And she told me. It was, sad to say, a common story. Her husband Eddie had been working late for the last six weeks or so. Not terribly late . . . just a couple of hours. And not every night . . . just once or twice a week.

"But you don't think he's really working late," I said. "Is that right?"

She nodded.

"I've tried calling him at his office when it happens," she said.

"His co-workers always tell me he's gone."

"Maybe the co-workers made a mistake," I said. Though it didn't seem likely.

Chloe Stenning didn't seem to think much of the idea either. She shook her head. "No, he's cheating on me. I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"I just know it."

Well, it's hard to argue with that logic. "Have you asked him?" She shook her head.

"Don't you think you should?"

"No," she said. "I don't want him to think I'm suspicious."

"I see," I said. Which was as big a lie as I've told in recent history.

I looked at my notepad and silently cursed Kevin Sweeney. And as long as I was silently cursing, I put in a word or two for Sweeney's wife Mary Margaret. And a few more for Professor Warren Lister. I gave my own fool self a few choice words as well.

Sweeney and I have a small private investigative agency in one of those quaint little Massachusetts seacoast villages north of Boston. Mostly what we do is criminal defense work. A little arson, a little murder, a little drug dealing in the night. It may not be nice, but it feels cleaner than most domestic work. There is something about an imploding relationship that makes a simple robbery-homicide seem almost tidy.

But sometimes, when the cash flow gets a tad tight, Sweeney and I have to take on domestic

cases. And our cash flow had become a cash trickle. Which was why I was sitting in our conference room with Chloe Stenning and Warren Lister.

Professor Warren Lister. He was the reason I was silently cursing Sweeney and his normally charming wife. Mary Margaret had decided to go back to school and finish her degree. Which is a fine thing in itself. But she took a sociology course that happened to be taught by our boy Warren. And when he learned Mary Margaret's husband was a licensed private investigator, he went quivery all over and asked her to arrange a meeting with him. Which she did. Who wants to irritate their professor?

Sweeney, to give him credit—which I sorely hate to do—wasn't at all happy about meeting Warren. Sweeney's a former police officer, and he's got a cop's disdain for and suspicion of academics. Still, he dearly loves his wife and would do just about anything for her.

So Sweeney agreed to meet Warren for lunch one day. And he persuaded me to tag along as well. I thought it could be a hoot. And I figured I'd get myself a free lunch. And besides, I'd do just about anything for Mary Margaret Sweeney my ownself.

We met in one of those trendy restaurants. Lots of wood and brass, high fern content, omelettes with goat's cheese, a microbrewery. After we ordered, Warren told us he wanted to

study us. Not us in particular but private investigators. He wanted to follow us around over the summer break, he said, and look at what we did and how we did it. He said he wanted to explore our "occupational milieu" and our "work culture."

Sweeney was reluctant. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not even sure we have an occupational milieu."

It was clear Sweeney didn't want his wife's sociology professor hanging out with us over the summer. You could almost see his flesh crawl at the idea. He looked to me for support.

"Sure we do," I said. "We've got bags full of occupational milieu. We've got enough occupational milieu to choke a donkey." I dearly love making Sweeney uncomfortable. It's wrong, I know, and I ought to be terribly ashamed of myself.

Warren looked at me when I spoke up. I knew that look. A lot of folks up north, the moment they hear a Southern accent they think two things. Dumb and racist. They seem to think all Southern white folks spend their time picking their teeth and trying to find some way to keep black folks down. I'm used to it. Mostly. Besides, in this biz it sometimes helps to have folks think you're dumber than you really are.

"I don't know," Sweeney said again. "Dr. Lister, we do . . ."

"Call me Warren," Lister said. He was trying for that just-us-boys thing. But it wasn't working.

"Warren, we do private inves-

tigations," Sweeney said. "The operative word there is 'private.' I don't think our clients would like it if we brought along observers."

Warren was ready for that one. He told us about the "rigorous human subject policies" of the university and offered to show us the confidentiality restrictions covered in his research proposal.

I don't know about other folks, but I'd rather shove a fondue fork in my eye than read a research proposal.

"Oh, I don't think we need to see the proposal right now," I said. "You can mail a copy of it to Sweeney."

Sweeney didn't seem amused. I pointed with my fork. "You go in to eat those fries, Warren?"

Warren pushed his french fries in my direction. Then he proceeded to swear enough oaths to secrecy and confidentiality and discretion to please the CIA, MI5, and a computer software company.

Sweeney tried a few more discouraging words, but old Warren said he was ready to do whatever it took. And me, I egged the poor sap on.

Which is where I made my big mistake. Most of the misery I've suffered in my semi-long and somewhat wicked life has been self-inflicted. I'd forgotten that when the semester ended Sweeney and Mary Margaret were heading to Ireland for two weeks. Which meant I was the only person with an available occupational milieu for Warren to study.

So in trying to tweak Sweeney's nose all I'd managed to do was to step on my own. There's a lesson there, I suspect.

So that's how I found myself sitting in the conference room with a Yankee sociology professor and a woman who'd decided her husband was cheating on her.

"Mrs. Stenning, do you love your husband?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Talk to him," I said. "Ask him what's going on. There might be a simple explanation for his behavior."

"I can't do that," she said. "I can't confront him until I know."

"You don't need to confront him, Mrs. Stenning," I said. "But if you love your husband, you should trust him enough to..."

"But I don't trust him," she said. "Why are you trying to talk me out of this? Don't you want my case?"

Well, no, I didn't want her case. But I did want her money. "I'm sorry," I said. "I just don't want you to rush into this. This is an important decision."

She gave me a cold look. And got out her checkbook.

Before I let Chloe Stenning leave the office, I asked her a lot of really nosy questions and suggested some rude behavior she should try. A lot of detective work involves really nosy questions and rude behavior. I asked about her sex life with her husband—folks having affairs often show either an increase or a decrease in their sexual appetite. It

turned out she and Eddie hadn't done it at all in the last couple of months. I asked if her Eddie had showed any radical mood swings, any bursts of anger or tears—having and hiding an affair plays hell with a person's nerves. Chloe said Eddie had seemed sort of quiet and depressed ever since he started coming home late.

Warren sat quietly through all the questions trying not to look uncomfortable. It's not pleasant, listening to folks bare their souls. But you get used to it.

I suggested that Chloe start searching her husband's clothes, looking for anything that might indicate he was trashing around. Motel receipts, the scent of perfume or smoke on his clothes, someone else's hair. What Sweeney would call trace evidence. And I suggested she go through all of Eddie's old credit card receipts. And that she listen in on his phone calls if she could. And that she start keeping track of the odometer on Eddie's car so we could tell how far he was driving.

I suggested all sorts of despicable stuff, stuff you should never ever do to a person you love.

Chloe seemed eager to help.

Warren sat there taking it all in. Soaking up that occupational milieu. I think he was trying for a hardboiled look, but he was only managing to look professorial and confused.

So there we were the next day, Warren and I, sitting in my car

parked outside the gate to the Creighton Shipyard. We were waiting for Eddie Stenning to come cruising through the gate in his company car. A white Saturn.

I'm a Southern boy. I belong to a culture well grounded in conversation. I found it impossible to sit there with another person in the car and not talk. So I heard myself putting voice to the thought that had been wasping around in my brain ever since we took the case.

"I hate marital work," I said.

"Why?" he asked. He opened his little notebook. To record my thoughts, I suppose. I must have been letting a little work culture peek out. But that's what he was there for, so I gave it to him.

"I hate it on account of it's ugly," I said. "Two folks who are supposed to love each other. Who probably *used* to love each other. And now one of them is paying us good money to follow the other. It's just ugly. And besides, it probably won't matter what we learn."

"Why not?"

Cars were beginning to leave the shipyard gate. The day shift was over.

"It never does any good," I said.

"Once a person is suspicious enough to hire a P.I. to follow their spouse around, the relationship is headed for disaster. If we confirm the client's suspicions, the relationship usually goes down in flames. If we don't confirm the client's suspicions, the client usually stays suspi-

cious. Which means the relationship will probably go down in flames."

"If it doesn't do any good, why do you do it?"

I grinned. "A man's got to buy beans and tortillas," I said. "Besides, I keep hoping that if I can give a suspicious spouse some good news maybe they'll keep things together long enough to work out their problems. Maybe the horse will learn to sing."

Warren looked at me like I'd taken leave of my senses. I've seen that look before. Sweeney looks at me that way all the time. "What's that about a horse?" he asked. "I don't understand."

"There he is," I said. I pointed to a white Saturn in the middle of the slow stream of cars leaving the shipyard.

I started the engine, shifted into first, and then just sat there.

Warren leaned forward as the Saturn drove off. "Let's go," he said. "He's getting away."

I shook my head. "Maybe not," I said, and pointed out the window. "'Cause there he is again."

A second white Saturn was leaving the gate. Then a third. And a fourth.

Over the next fifteen minutes we counted fourteen white Saturns. It seemed every mid-level executive in the Creighton Shipyard was issued a white Saturn.

"Now what do we do?" Warren asked.

"Do you watch the television news at eleven?" I asked.

Warren looked confused, but he nodded.

"Good," I said. "I'll come pick you up at your house when the news is over. We'll take care of it then."

Warren was sitting on his porch waiting for me when I drove up. He was in my car almost before it stopped. Grinning like he'd just won the pumpkin judging contest.

"What is it we're going to do?" he asked. He was dressed all in black. Black jeans, black turtle-neck, black sneakers. The sneakers had that right-out-of-the-box look. I suppose I was lucky he wasn't wearing a ninja mask and toting those little throwing stars.

"We're going to make it a little easier to follow Eddie Stenning from work tomorrow," I said.

Warren's eyes were all glittery bright. It affects some folks that way. Being out late at night when all the decent people are at home in bed. Out on some secret mission, preparing to do something a little shady. Some folks get caught up in it. They think it's sexy.

And it is, sort of. It's a sick thing, maybe, but it's fun. Not that I'd have admitted it to Warren.

"I see," Warren said. "We're going to plant a tracking device on his car."

"Well, we're going to do something a tad less James Bond than that," I said. "I'm a low-tech sort of guy."

Warren was grinning like a coke fiend. That boy was like to wet his pants with excitement.

It didn't take long to get to the Stennings' house—a two story Tudor-looking unit with a bay window and some sort of creeping ivy that was slowly destroying the neighbors' privacy fence. Stenning didn't live all that far from Warren. The upper middle class tends to congregate in convenient clumps.

I mentioned that to Warren, thinking he might like a bit of P.I. wisdom.

"Propinquity," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Propinquity," he said again.

"The tendency toward geographic proximity among social classes."

"Ah," I said. "Propinquity. Right."

I drove a block past the Stenning house and parked.

"Pass me over that flashlight, would you?" I keep a big five-cell Maglite in the car. Everybody should. You never know when you're going to need a flashlight.

Warren handed me the flashlight. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I don't want you to do anything," I said, "except hush up. This is only going to take a second, but you need to be quiet. Take some notes or something."

The lights were off in the house. The Saturn was parked in the drive.

Warren was hovering around me like a moth. "Won't the flashlight attract attention when you turn it on?" he whispered.

"Why on earth would I turn it on?" I asked.

I walked up to the Saturn and

used the big Maglite to smash the right taillight. Didn't hardly make a sound at all.

Tuesday afternoon only one white Saturn with a busted taillight drove out the shipyard gate.

Eddie Stenning was a delight to tail. He drove like a Mormon. He used his turn signals, he came to a full stop at stop signs, he slowed up and prepared to stop at yellow lights. My grammy could have tailed Eddie. And my grammy drinks a bit.

Eddie drove straight home.

He did the same thing Wednesday afternoon.

That's the nature of surveillance work. There's a lot of waiting. You just have to learn patience. It's a zen thing—sitting quietly and waiting, being aware without anticipation or expectation. Taking the world exactly as it comes.

I'm used to it. I even sort of enjoy it. But old Warren, he didn't have a good grasp on the tao of surveillance. He had no tolerance at all for sitting and watching. Not many Yankees do. I blame it on the fact that there aren't enough porches up north. Folks never acquire the knack of sitting quietly and watching the world move by.

Warren fidgeted like a drunk with the DT's. And the man could not keep quiet. Once he got over his Yankee reserve, he began to ask questions. Asked me about P.I. work, about growing up in the segregated South, about

the lack of depth in the Red Sox bull pen, about the Mars lander.

By Thursday afternoon I was giving some serious thought to tying Warren up and chunking him in the trunk.

That was the afternoon Eddie Stenning turned off his usual route home.

"Where's he going?" Warren asked.

"How should I know?"

Warren's eyes got big and lit up. He was jazzed. "This is it, isn't it. He's going . . . to wherever it is he's going."

And this guy is a college professor. "There's no need to get ourselves in a sweat just yet," I said. "He might just be heading for the drive-thru window at Colonel Sanders. Or maybe he's got to pick up the dry cleaning."

"My God, this is fun," Warren said.

I wasn't sure why Warren was so worked up. It wasn't like we were in a high speed pursuit. Eddie was still driving with all the reckless daring of Ward Cleaver on tranquilizers.

Then Eddie turned into one of the arched entrances of the Steadwell Gardens Cemetery.

I was stunned. "Well, I'll be damned and go to hell," I said.

Warren goggled at me. "What? What's the matter?"

I drove past the entrance and pulled the car over to the curb.

"Aren't we going to follow him in?" Warren asked.

But I was already halfway out the door by that time, and jogging back to the entrance. I heard

Warren open his door and follow along after.

By the time I got to the entrance Eddie and his Saturn were nowhere to be seen.

I couldn't help but grin. "That dog," I said.

"What's going on?"

"We just got scraped off," I said.

"What? What? Scraped off? I don't understand."

"Scraped off," I said. "It's what you do when you don't want to be followed. The followee scrapes off the follower."

But it was clear Warren was still confused. So I explained.

Steadwell Gardens is the oldest and largest cemetery in town. It takes up three or four suburban blocks and looks like a private golf course. Lots of tall trees, softly rolling hills, narrow curving roads. The trees are planted in such a way as to give grieving families lots of privacy, so Steadwell Gardens feels more like a whole bunch of little cemeteries instead of one really big one. And surrounding the whole thing is a lovely green privacy hedge about six feet tall and thick as brick.

Steadwell Gardens is a great place to be dead. It's also a great place to spot and lose a tail. First off, it's just plain tough to tail somebody in a cemetery. Any cemetery. At any time. There isn't a lot of traffic in cemeteries, and folks tend to drive real slow. So it's easy to spot somebody following you. Stevie Wonder could probably spot a tail in a cemetery.

Second, Steadwell Gardens has six different entrances on four different streets. Which means you can enter on Willow Street and exit on Pine, or on Mission Avenue, or on Dugdale Street. Or you can leave by another exit farther down on Willow. That means a single P.I. can't cover all the exits. Which basically means you lose the subject. Scraped off.

"And you think he drove in there deliberately?"

"Well, yeah," I said. "Nobody drives into a cemetery by accident. The question is, did he drive in there deliberately to scrape us off."

"Couldn't he just be visiting a grave?"

"Sure he could," I said. "That's the most innocent and most likely explanation. But here's a true thing about P.I. work. The most innocent and most likely explanation isn't necessarily what happens."

Warren actually wrote that down. "What do we do now?"

"We get back in the car, and we drive around the block for a while looking for Eddie," I said. "And later on, unless we get real lucky, we'll call Chloe Stenning and tell her we lost her husband."

And that's just what we did. Drove around the block four times without seeing any white Saturns. Drove through the cemetery twice, but that's a big chunk of land and it would have been really easy to miss Eddie. Drove to a nearby convenience store and stopped at the pay phone.

"Mrs. Stenning?" I said into the telephone. "Your husband took a different route out of the shipyard this afternoon. But I'm afraid we lost him."

"Lost him?"

"Yes, ma'am." I did what most folks do when forced to admit failure. I fell back on jargon in an effort to sound competent. "The subject—your husband—left the shipyard west gate at five eleven P.M. My associate and I maintained mobile surveillance until we reached Willow Street, at which time—"

"Willow?" she asked. "What was he doing over there?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, ma'am," I said. "We lost him at five twenty-six P.M. We attempted to reacquire the subject—your husband—for approximately twenty minutes without success."

I hurried on before she could comment on that. "Would you please note the exact time he arrives at home this evening? And check his odometer. That will help us to determine the radius of his possible movements."

It was all nonsense, of course. It probably wouldn't tell us anything useful at all. But it had the sound of military precision about it, and clients eat that military sounding stuff up with a spoon. If you can't give them good service, you can at least give them the illusion of it.

Warren and I got back in the car. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now we go home," I said. "We'll try again tomorrow."

"That's it?" he said. "We just go

home? That's not very satisfying. In fact, it's damned frustrating."

"Welcome to the exciting world of private investigation," I said.

The next morning Warren and I discussed a plan in case Eddie tried to scrape us off at the cemetery again. "Are you a good runner?" I asked him.

"I do three miles every morning."

I looked at him. Three miles. In the morning. I have never understood the attraction of running for fun. The whole concept is foreign to me. I declare, it must be a form of madness. But it's not a form I'm familiar with. Madness in South Carolina takes a less strenuous form. My Uncle Peawood is loonier than a peach orchard boar, but he knows enough not to get up in the morning and go *running*.

"Good," I said. I handed him one of our Handi-Coms, a little two-way radio, and showed him how to use it.

"If it looks like we're going to the cemetery again," I said, "I'll pass Eddie and drop you at the first entrance. You head in and try to follow him on foot. I'll keep circling the cemetery. If I see him pull out, I'll tail him. You'll have to grab a cab home. If I don't see him, I'll keep circling until you come out. Any questions?"

I'll say this for the professor—he was game to try just about anything. He thought the idea of jogging through a cemetery sounded like fun. He even went home to fetch a bright red jog-

ging outfit before we headed for the shipyard to tail Eddie. Said he wanted to stay in character. Whatever that meant.

I admit I had high hopes for that afternoon. It was a Friday and a payday. Perfect time for old Eddie to be meeting his outside squeeze. If that was what he was doing.

Eddie, though, was a good boy; he drove straight home. He did the same thing for the first three days of the next week. The only excitement was on Tuesday when Eddie pulled into a gas station. I was able to scribble in my notepad that Eddie put seven dollars of unleaded in his Saturn. It was going to be hard to make that sound impressive in our report to Chloe.

It was a painful time. Warren decided we were meant to be friends and friends "share" things. He took to telling me all about his life. He talked about his academic career (he was unhappy with it), about the pressure he was under to publish in the most influential scholarly journals (he was unhappy with it), about his colleagues (he was unhappy with them), about his marriage (guess what).

Now, Southern folk talk a lot. At least, we do in my part of South Carolina. But we don't talk about ourselves. And certainly not about our feelings. Not with near strangers. But we're also raised to be polite, so I nodded and clucked and sympathized with poor Warren's terrible hardships. But I was never so happy

as I was on that Thursday when Eddie turned off his usual route home.

When it looked liked he was headed toward Steadwell Gardens again, I turned to Warren. "You ready?" I asked.

"Ready," he said. His eyes were sparkling, and he was grinning like he was the illegitimate child of Charles and Camilla. He began to do stretching exercises in the car.

I passed Eddie just before we turned onto Willow. And got caught behind a big funeral procession. Not mafiosi big, but big enough that it had traffic backed up a bit as they turned into the leafy archway of Steadwell Gardens. I kept an eye on Eddie in the rear view mirror just to make sure he made the turn and was behind us. I'd have looked like a pure born fool if our boy had kept going straight through the intersection.

I passed the funeral procession, made sure Warren had the Handi-Com turned on, pulled over to the side of the road, and dropped him off. He was jogging merrily through the arch as I drove away.

At the stop sign on the corner I held a long stop, waiting for Eddie to appear in the rear view mirror. The funeral procession had made it in the gate and the cars backed up behind it were just breaking free.

I watched Eddie Stenning turn under the arch.

"He's coming your way," I said into my Handi-Com.

"Roger that," Warren said, his voice flattened by the little speaker. "I have visual contact." Roger that? Visual contact? Give the man a walkie-talkie and he becomes General George Patton. Pretty soon he'd be calling in coordinates for an artillery strike.

I drove slowly around the corner.

"Subject is turning right," Warren said. "Proceeding at a moderate . . . uh . . . at a moderate . . ."

"Pace?" I suggested. I made a U-turn and drove back the way I'd come. "Speed?"

"The funeral," Warren said. "It's stopping right in front of us."

"So?" I said. "It's a cemetery. They have to stop to bury the bodies. No drive-by burials allowed."

"What do I do?"

"What do you mean?"

"All the mourners are getting out of their cars," Warren said. "I can't go jogging through them."

"Why not?"

"It's not done," Warren said.

"What's Eddie doing?"

"He's driving slowly," he said. "The mourners are letting him pass. But he's in a car. I'm in a red jogging suit."

"Warren, you said you wanted to study the private investigator's work culture," I said. "Well, our work culture includes jogging through funerals. Get after Eddie."

I drove slowly and cursed amateurs. Which wasn't fair. I know if I'd been wearing a bright red jogging outfit I'd have found it

difficult to jog through a group of mourners. But that didn't stop me from cursing.

"What's going on?" I barked into the Handi-Com.

It took a moment for Warren to answer. "He . . . I, uh, I got . . . we got scraped off."

"We what?"

"I lost him," Warren said. And even through the tinny Handi-Com speaker I could hear the embarrassment and failure in his voice. "He went around a corner, and by the time I got there, he was gone. There's a Y intersection. One way goes over a hill, the other around a small grove of trees. I guess I chose the wrong branch."

Well, at least he'd stopped talking like GI Joe.

I sped up, hurrying over to the south side of the cemetery. No Eddie in a Saturn. I continued to circle the cemetery. Nothing.

"What should I do?" Warren asked.

"I'll pick you up outside the west gate," I said.

Another hesitation. "I don't know which gate is the west gate," he said.

"You went in the east gate," I said. "The west gate will be on the opposite side."

"I'm all turned around," he said sadly. "I don't even know where I am."

"Head toward the setting sun," I told him.

"I'm sorry," Warren said. "I messed up."

Roger that.

It was not fun to report to

Chloe Stenning that we'd lost her husband again. And lost him in the very same neighborhood we'd lost him in the last time.

"Did he know you were following him?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "He wasn't driving like he thought he was being tailed. But he's lost us twice now. Does he have any reason to think he might be being followed?"

"Maybe," she said. "If he's cheating on me, he might be expecting to be followed. It's happened before."

"You hired a detective agency before?" I asked.

"Not me," she said. "His ex-wife. When Eddie was having an affair with me. She had us followed."

"Oh," I said. What else was there to say?

"I should have known," she said. "You marry a man who cheats on his wife, you marry a man who cheats on his wife."

The next afternoon I took up station outside the shipyard gate alone. Entirely alone. Sans Warren. Warrenless. It was great.

I hadn't booted old Warren out of our occupational milieu. I'd just put him in his own car and stationed him inside the east entrance of Steadwell Gardens. As long as Eddie Stenning followed his usual pattern, we were fairly well prepared. My biggest fear was that Eddie would get that taillight fixed. Then I'd have to vandalize his car all over again.

Two nights later Eddie turned off his usual route, heading toward Steadwell Gardens. When we were in range, I alerted Warren.

"Red Dog One, this is Red Dog Leader," I said. "The Eagle is landing. I repeat, the Eagle is landing."

"What?" Warren asked.

"Eddie," I said. "He's about to turn onto Willow. So hop out of your car and start stretching."

"Ten-four."

This time when Eddie pulled into the arched cemetery entrance I hung back a moment, then followed him in.

"I see him," Warren reported. "He's turning right, just like before. I'm behind him but keeping space."

A creature of habit, our Eddie. I turned right and dawdled along, out of sight of both Eddie and Warren.

"He's at the Y intersection and going up the rise," Warren said. "Just as I thought, I chose the wrong turn last time." He sounded pleased with himself, although a tad winded.

I could see Warren jogging over the rise as I came to the Y intersection. I slowed down just a bit.

Warren reported his position faithfully, if a bit breathlessly, as Eddie took a circuitous route through the cemetery. I was actually enjoying myself. The trees were pretty, the grass was summer green. And if I'd had the windows down and the air conditioning off, I suspect I'd've heard

the birds singing. It was like driving slowly in a park. Well, a park full of buried dead folks.

"Whoa!" Warren called out. "He's stopping." He and Eddie were just a short ways in front, around a blind corner blocked by tall poplars.

"Stopping?" I pulled to a stop. "Did he spot you?"

"I don't think so. What should I do?"

"Keep jogging," I said. "Act like you're just jogging through the cemetery. Once you get past him, find a place to hide and wait. Report back when you're set."

A few moments later Warren buzzed back. "I'm set," he said. "I don't think he can see me."

"What's he doing?" I asked.

"He's still there."

"Still where?" I'm normally a calm man. But I declare, there were moments when I wanted to beat Warren Lister like a red-headed stepchild.

"He's at a grave."

A grave? I got out of the car and hurried to the poplars. I peeked through them. And sure enough, there was Eddie Stenning's Saturn. And a few yards away, near some pretty little juniper bushes, was Eddie Stenning his ownself. He was sort of crouched in front of a modest granite headstone. Tidying up a grave.

"I see him," I said to the Handi-Com.

"You see him? Where are you?"

I told him.

"What do we do now?" Warren asked.

"We have him surrounded," I said. "He's not going anywhere. Now we wait and we see what happens."

And we waited. Waited about forty-five minutes. During which Eddie fussed over the grave and talked. I suppose he was talking to whoever was dead under the headstone.

I went back to the car, got my camera, and took a few photographs. Just to document it.

Eddie stood up eventually. He put his hand on the headstone. It seemed a strangely intimate gesture. I've seen Sweeney reach out and touch his wife's shoulder like that when he's heading out the door. There was a sweetness to it.

It was almost too intimate to photograph. But I fired off a frame anyway.

"He's leaving," Warren informed me.

"I see that."

"Shall I follow him out?"

I told him not to bother. We knew where Eddie was spending his lost moments. We just didn't know who he was spending them with. After Eddie drove off, Warren and I slowly converged on the headstone. It said:

IMELDA STENNING
*All that live must die
Passing through nature to
eternity*

"His mother?" Warren asked.

I pointed out the dates. "Wasn't old enough to be his mother," I said.

"His sister, then."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Then who?"

"His ex-wife."

Warren's eyes went wide. "My goodness," he said.

And suddenly I was grinning. I felt like I'd just won a roll of quarters at the slot machines.

"What?" Warren asked. "Why are you grinning?"

"We get to give good news to Chloe Stenning," I said. "Maybe the horse *will* learn to sing."

"That's the second time you've said that," Warren said. "What does it mean?"

"It's an old Persian folktale," I said. "There was a criminal, a thief, who was scheduled to be beheaded. As he was being led to the chopping block, he called out to the king, saying, 'If you spare my life, I'll teach your horse to sing hymns.' The king must have had a sense of humor on account of he spared the thief's life and gave him a year to teach the horse to sing. If he failed, at the end of the year he'd go back to the block. So the thief began to spend all his time with the king's horse, singing hymns to it. All the other criminals laughed. 'You'll never be able to teach that horse to sing,' they told him. And the thief just smiled. He said, 'I have a year. A lot can happen in a year. Maybe the horse will die. Maybe the king will die. Maybe I'll die. And who knows, maybe the horse will learn to sing.'"

Warren blinked at me a few times. "I don't understand," he said.

"We're giving Chloe Stenning good news," I said. "We're telling her that her husband isn't having an affair, which is what she's expecting to hear. Maybe this will give them the chance to work out their problems. What we're really doing is we're giving Chloe and Eddie time to teach the horse to sing."

"That bastard," Chloe Stenning said.

"Pardon?" I said.

After we left the cemetery, I called Chloe to tell her we'd discovered where her husband was spending his time. She said Eddie had just walked in the door and she couldn't talk. She asked us to come over the next day.

By the time we met the following day I'd done a bit more research. Imelda Stenning had in fact been Eddie's ex-wife. She'd died of uterine cancer a couple of months ago. About the time Eddie began coming home late.

Chloe invited us into the living room. We all sat on the edges of the furniture, like funeral-goers. I explained the situation, showed Chloe the photographs, and gave her a nicely jacketed copy of the

final report. With a bill discreetly attached.

She flipped through the photos, pausing at the last one. The one with Eddie touching the headstone.

"I knew it," she said softly, with resignation. "I knew he was cheating on me."

"Cheating on you?" I asked.

She nodded. "I never thought it would be with his ex-wife."

"Uh, Mrs. Stenning . . . his ex-wife is dead," I said.

"I know," she said. She dropped the photographs on the coffee table. "I know she's dead. And he still loves her. How am I going to compete with her now?"

Warren and I left as soon as we politely could. "Goodness," he said when we were in the car. "It was like something had died inside her. Is it always like that?"

I shook my head. "Not always. Some folks get angry and throw things."

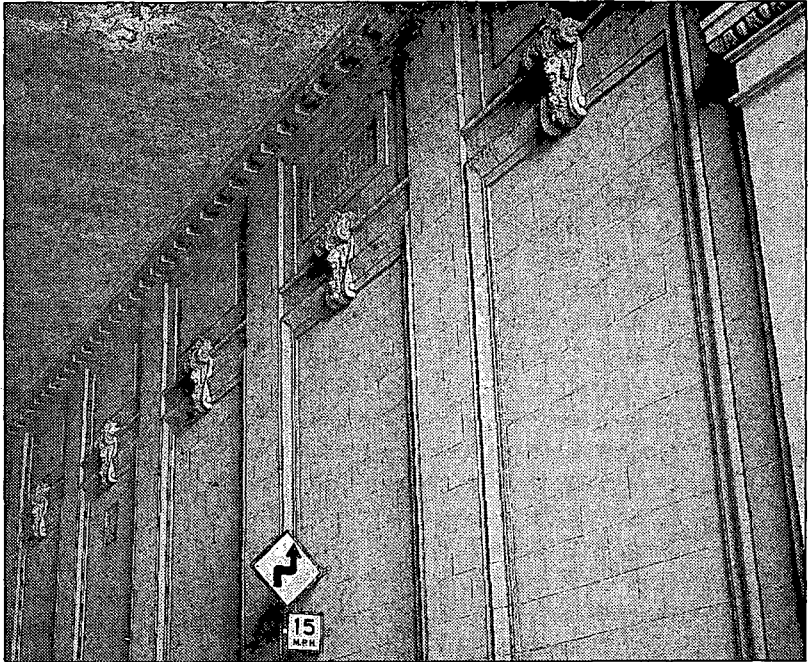
"Maybe you should have told her the story about the horse."

"It's a good story, isn't it," I said.

Warren nodded. "But it's just a story."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



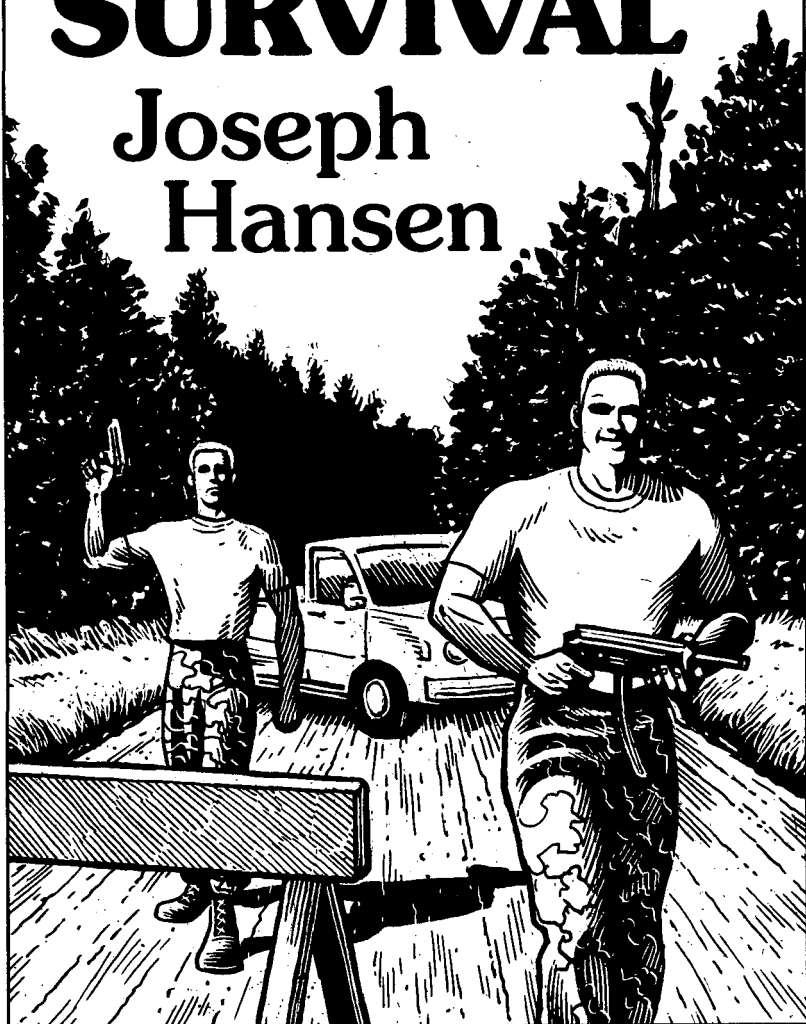
Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

You can speed up as you cross the ceiling. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "October Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the April Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

SURVIVAL

Joseph Hansen



It was a long drive north, half of California, all of Oregon, most of Washington, and then inland to George Stubbs' sister's house in Norton's Mill, Idaho, thirty miles from the Canadian border. And all the

way, Stubbs' trophy cups had rattled in their carton behind the seat. Bohannon had wrapped and cushioned them in newspaper, but somehow they'd managed to rattle anyway.

He hadn't known what to do

with them exactly. They had stood on the mantel of the boulder-built fireplace in his ranch-house for the eighteen or twenty years Stubbs had worked for him, lived side by side with him, been an interwoven part of his days. Those rodeo trophies for roping and bulldogging, for bronco busting and bull riding, had belonged on that mantel.

And it sure as hell had looked strange and naked once he'd taken them down and packed them for the trip, along with Stubbs' body in its coffin, to where the old man had said he wanted to be buried. In the same graveyard as his mother (God knew where his father's body lay), his brothers (who'd still been boys when they died), and his sister when her time came.

Norton's Mill had proved no different from what Bohannon had pictured, a sleepy little town among towering white pines. More Midwestern than Western, its houses were mainly wood-frame, and two storied, and getting on for a hundred years old. The house where Ada Tanner lived was one of these, white, four-square, with a wide, comfortable front porch but no fancy architectural furbelows. A wire mesh fence enclosed the yard and fruit trees in the yard and flowerbeds.

Ada Tanner looked like her brother, talked like him, was straightforward and homey. Bohannon hadn't known of her existence till Stubbs gave in to the idea that he was going to die.

Then he told Bohannon about her and the man she had married. Stubbs and Luke Tanner could not agree on whether it was raining. That was why he'd stayed away from his boyhood town even at the height of his rodeo fame and money. When Luke died, he'd thought about a trip to see Ada, but there was always so much to do at Bohannon's stables he'd put it off. And then he had become too arthritic, "stove up" as he put it, to travel.

So he did his traveling this October week in a pine box in the steel bed of Bohannon's green pickup truck. His trip home. Bohannon stayed for the funeral, of course, and the burial in the cemetery with its tilted headstones and lawns going brown for the winter. Nobody much came. Stubbs' glory days had gained him renown in Norton's Mill, but those glory days were the 1930's and 1940's, and the graveyard had claimed most of the people who'd remembered George Stubbs as a boy, before he'd left for more exciting places.

Women outlive men, so it was mostly whitehaired neighbor ladies who came for lunch to Ada Tanner's house following the ceremonies. There was one man, a skinny old geezer, who cornered Bohannon and talked about lunatics living in the woods up here, survivalists, anti-taxers, anti-blacks (there weren't but one or two blacks in the whole county), trying to live on forage, starving their children, sometimes freezing in the winters.

At last an old woman led him away. When they'd all gone, Bohannon told Ada Tanner goodbye, and she handed him a Bible, with red page-edges and floppy covers, plastic meant to look like leather. Stocky, ruddy-cheeked, hair freshly set for the funeral, she smelled of lavender soap and starch.

"I want you to have this," she said. "I wish it was a fine one, but I live on Social Security, and it's what's inside that counts. It's been my guide and mainstay all my life, so it's the gift I want to give you for being so good to George all those long years when he was past being able to do the strong, wild, crazy things he was so proud of."

"He didn't owe me," Bohannon said, "I owed him. I'd never have been able to make it without him. I'm going to miss him."

"I guess you don't call yourself one," she said, "but you're a Christian. Never mind—" she patted his hands as they held the Bible—"you have that, and keep it near you. It won't replace an old friend. But there's comfort in it."

"Thank you." Bohannon put on his sweat-stained Stetson and stepped out the screen door, an old one with a long black spring to pull it closed. The spring twanged. The door swung loosely shut. He crossed the porch. "Take care of yourself, Miz Tanner."

"Don't grieve," she said through the screen. "He's in a happy place now."

"If they have rodeos there," Bohannon said, and crossed over to

the driveway, where the green pickup waited.

Nothing was wrong with the motel room that wasn't wrong with all motel rooms, but he slept badly and was up and showered and dressed by four thirty and on his way home. In the dark. He had good sense, and most of the time he used it. But Stubbs' death had shaken him. And he began fretting and making bad decisions. Leaving Deputy T. Hodges in charge of the stables was asking too much of her. He'd rung her up every day of this trip, and she'd always sounded cheerful and on top of things and teased him for worrying. There was a hired hand. She wasn't alone, and she was young and strong, but she wasn't very big, and accidents could happen. Horses were unpredictable. No harm must come to T. Hodges. Not now. He couldn't take it.

So instead of returning to the coast and following the route that had brought him here, he took a state highway heading straight south, telling himself it would save time. Maybe it would have, but he wasn't going to find out. The highway wasn't much, and it soon entered a stand of giant Douglas firs that promised no end to itself. It was quiet, dim, and cold on that road. A little bit eerie. Soundless. He would have welcomed the rattling of those rodeo trophies now. He tried the radio, but reception was fitful and anyway he'd never much liked country and even less did

he like gospel and that was all the music there was. The trip grew stranger by the hour. Where was everybody? Not another car, not another truck. The world could have ended for all he knew.

Then he had to stop. That famous tree we've all heard about—the one that falls in a forest where there's no one to hear, and therefore can it be said for sure that it made a sound when it fell?—that tree had fallen across the road. A tremendous tree. As thick through as his truck. He couldn't drive around it. The ditches beside the road were too deep. He got stiffly out of the truck, stretched, lit a cigarette, studied the tree, finished the cigarette, dropped it, put it out carefully under his worn boot, climbed back in the truck, and after some backing and filling, pointed it north again. He'd seen a turnoff a few miles back. It had had no signboard, but it would take hours to get back to Norton's Mill and start the trip over. He'd try the side road, see where it led.

It was narrow, went crookedly through the trees, which grew denser here and were even older and thicker and taller than any he'd so far seen. Maybe the road had been graveled once. His tires threw up gravel now and then that rattled under the fenders. But before mankind had taken it over, he figured animals had laid it out and used it from the ancient start, deer, bear, puma. And when they came along, the Indians had seen no call to improve on it, and the Europeans

when they got here hadn't wasted much energy on it. Why they'd wasted even one load of gravel Bohannon couldn't see. He saw no signs of human settlement.

Then he came around a bend and sawhorses stood across the road and beyond them a parked van. He braked the green pickup and stared. The sawhorses were old, unpainted. Unlike his truck, with its horsehead logo on the door, the van had no markings. Oh, a sign had onetime been lettered on its side but then painted over. Maybe it had been white once, but it was gray now, mud-stained below, rainspotted and dusty above, and crusty on its roof with bird droppings and brown pine needles. Its sliding door opened, and two young men jumped out of it wearing army camouflage fatigues and floppy camouflage hats. Each had a gun. One was a .357 Magnum. The other was an AK-47.

Bohannon had not brought his Winchester. In California he was licensed to keep it on its rack over the back window of the truck. But for getting without hassle from state to state he figured he'd better leave it at home. He jammed the truck into reverse and began backing as fast as he could. But not fast enough. The man with the AK-47 fired shots. Not at him. Not at the truck. Over the truck roof. Warning shots.

Bohannon braked, one rear wheel in the ditch. They came jogging up the road. He put up his hands. "Just a mistake," he said. "I got lost."

"You shoulda picked someplace else." Both boys had beard stubble and blue eyes and hair too long for their hats to conceal. "Get out of there."

"He don't look like no FBI," the boy with the handgun said.

"He looks like a goddamn Indian," the other one said. "Get out."

Bohannon got out. "My folks were Irish, if that's any help."

"You say," the AK-47 boy said. "Turn around. Hands on the hood there. Spread your legs."

"Who are you? What gives you the right to—"

"You're in Ninth Amendment America now." The boy held onto the gun but patted Bohannon down with his free hand. "We don't go by Jew York D.C. laws here. We got Christian laws, God's laws. Question isn't who we are." He straightened up and looked through the wallet he had taken from Bohannon's hip pocket. "It's who you are and what you're doing here. Oh my!" He turned to his partner. "Lookie here, Hadley. This man is a private investigator."

He grabbed Bohannon's arm and swung him around. "Who sent you? Who you working for? FBI? Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms? Who tipped you off to find us here? Nobody knows. Nobody."

"Including me," said Bohannon. "I just stumbled in here. The state road is blocked. A fallen tree. I was looking for a way to keep going south without—"

"You're lying." The boy slapped him.

"Don't be nervous," Bohannon said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy slapped him again, and Bohannon punched him in the face, and he fell on his butt on the road and the gun went off. A chatter of fire into the air. He scrambled up. "Hell, it don't really matter who you are or why you come." He wiped his bloody mouth with a hand, looked at the hand, glared at Bohannon. "I'm going to shoot you dead one way or the other. 'Cause I can't let you go back and tell where we are." He jerked the gun barrel. "Go on. Walk into the trees. I'll be right behind you."

Bohannon didn't move. He heard footsteps. Someone was coming through the trees opposite. The boy took hold of him again, yanked him, shoved him toward the ditch, and a man appeared on the other side of the road. A middle-aged man, camouflage pants and jacket, also with long hair with a camouflage cap on it. Only his hair was gray. He wore Desert Storm dark glasses and a big old .45 revolver in a holster.

"Ford?" he said. "Hadley? What's all the ruckus? Anybody could have heard that gunfire. The whole damned U.S. Army could be down on us."

"Niggers," Ford jeered. "Mud people. Who cares?"

The middle-aged man walked up to Bohannon. "Who are you?"

"Bohannon is my name." Close up he recognized the man. His picture was in the files at the sheriff's substation in Madrone.

Bohannon checked those files out now and then. Cunningham? Yes, Chester Cunningham. U.S. Marine Corps, retired. Something about stockpiling firearms, altering firearms, transporting firearms across state borders. "What's yours?"

Cunningham ignored that. "What are you doing here?"

"He's an investigator licensed by the State of California," Ford said. "You think he's going to tell us what he's doing here?"

"I think you should remember who you're talking to," Cunningham said, "and correct your tone." And to Bohannon, "Where did you learn I was here?"

Bohannon told his story again.

"I guess not," the man said.

"Captain?" The Hadley boy had been rummaging in the truck. "He might not be lying."

Cunningham and Ford looked at him. Bohannon looked, too. Hadley came bringing Ada Tanner's Bible. He said, "This man's a Christian."

"That right?" Cunningham held out a hand for the book, and the boy gave it to him. He looked at it thoughtfully for a minute, lifting it a little, weighing it in his hand. He blinked at Bohannon. "That a fact?"

Bohannon didn't answer.

Cunningham opened the truck door, laid the Bible on the seat, and turned on the radio. Staticky music played. A lush orchestra backed a sincere-sounding baritone who crooned, "I am satisfied with Je-sus, He has meant so much to me-e-e . . ." The mu-

sic ceased. Cunningham slammed the door of the truck and said to Bohannon, "Come with me," motioned with the revolver for Bohannon to go ahead of him across the road and into the trees. Bohannon went.

"Don't mean nothing," Ford called. "About all you can get on the radio up here."

Cunningham stopped. "What do you want, Ford—rock and roll? Rap? Hip-hop?"

"No, sir," Ford said quickly, turning red. "'Course not."

Cunningham grunted. "Bring that truck to the compound." Then he nodded Bohannon into the trees. The walk was a long one. Then here was a small settlement of rough shacks set at odd angles to one another, a large open space between. At a guess the planks and two by fours had been sawn here out of trees felled illegally. With gas-powered saws: there were no power lines. He glimpsed crude outhouses set back in the brush. That meant no running water, didn't it? What then: a well, or maybe a spring or stream near enough to walk to with buckets? The old geezer at Ada Tanner's had been right: life here was primitive. Vehicles stood around, a sad assortment of rusty pickup trucks, vans, RV's, a once-racy red sportscar layered with dead pine needles, its cloth top hanging in tatters.

Two buildings rose up bigger than the rest, one living quarters, the other for storage, a warehouse. Or was it a barn? The pine smell that dropped from the huge

trees was strong in the growing warmth of the day, but still he detected a whiff of horse. Cunningham pushed open the plank door into the house and motioned Bohannon through, went in after him, and closed the door.

Inside, in a wash of greenish daylight through dirty windowpanes, sagged sorry old furniture, not much of it, a sofa, a greasy overstuffed armchair, side chairs with threadbare seats. On the mantel a row of smoky kerosene lanterns. Over them a big American flag. A case to hold rifles, the pane of one glass door cracked. A round dining table from fifty years ago or more. Some rickety unmatched chairs. A battered library table on one wall was heaped with papers, magazines, typewritten stuff. Tacked to the wall above it was a map of the eleven western states with colored push-pins stuck in it. A marked-up street map of some town was held by one of them.

At the far end of the room a kitchen housed a cast-iron cookstove, shelves holding mismatched china, battered pots and pans hanging up, sooty skillets. Stacked on the floor were supplies, sacks of flour and rice, restaurant size cans of baked beans, vegetable soup, sliced peaches, applesauce. Boxes of crackers and cold cereals, dehydrated milk and mashed potatoes. Great big cans of coffee. COFFEE. No brand name. Stairs fashioned of half logs climbed to a loft that bracketed the room below. He glimpsed tousled bedding.

"Sit down," Cunningham said. "Care for some coffee?"

"I'd like to buy it at a diner in the next town," Bohannon said.

"We can't always have what we'd like," Cunningham said with a thin smile. "Sit down." He raised his voice. "Selina?" The kitchen door opened. A thin woman in her mid-thirties came in, shut the door, set down a bucket of coal. Blonde hair combed out long and straight. No makeup, but good features, good bones. She wore glasses, jeans, an unbuttoned lumberjack shirt, under it a black T-shirt with 9TH AMENDMENT stenciled on it, old workboots. But something about her said breeding, education. "Coffee," Cunningham told her, and sat down himself. In the overstuffed chair.

"Who's that?" she said, staring.

"Name's Bohannon."

"Do we know him?" She tilted her head. Then she gave it a shake. "No. We don't know him. So what's he doing here?"

Bohannon took off his hat and nodded to her. "I strayed in by accident."

"Bad luck," she said as if she sympathized. "And bad timing."

"Will you just get the coffee?" Cunningham said.

Her expression of alertness changed to one of wooden obedience. "Yes, sir," she said and turned to the stove.

"Do you know who I am?" Cunningham asked Bohannon.

"Is that captain a real rank or honorary?"

"Real. Vietnam. Actually—" the

thin smile came back "—I'm the general, field marshal, chief of staff."

"President," the woman said and set down coffee mugs, one beside the captain's chair, one beside Bohannon's. "Of Ninth Amendment America."

"You know what that means?" Cunningham asked.

"I get the feeling you're going to tell me," Bohannon said.

"The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

"What others?"

"Those are the words the Founding Fathers wrote. That is the whole sum and substance of the Ninth Amendment. Every word of it." He gave a patronizing smile. "Good question, though. Gets to the heart of it. Most of the laws the overlords have passed since it was written deny and disparage the rights of the people. Taxes, licenses, building regulations, zoning regulations, speed limits, fishing rights, grazing rights, hunting rights, compulsory insurance, can't do this, can't do that, can't do the other thing . . . Those elected so-called representatives in D.C. say what Ninth Amendment? What unnamed rights? We're the ones who make the laws. Can't run a country without laws. Can't run a country without taxes. You paid yours?"

"I see." Bohannon had put his hat on the floor. He picked it up and got out of the chair. Cunningham with surprising quick-

ness pulled the .45 from its holster and pointed it at him. He didn't say anything, he just looked mean. Bohannon asked, "What about my rights? I'd like to leave here. I have horses to look after, a business to run. I have to get back to California."

"Sit down." He waited, with the gun pointed, and Bohannon sat down again. "You don't know my face? You never heard of Chester Cunningham?"

"In what connection?" Bohannon looked out the window beside the fireplace. "Politics? Run for office on the Ninth Amendment ticket, did you?"

"Don't play games," Cunningham said. "TV, radio, the newspapers. You're not a monk. Of course you've heard of me."

Bohannon judged the man needed for him to say yes, to light up with excitement if possible—even better, to fall down and worship. "I stable horses up in a canyon where TV doesn't reach any better than it probably reaches here." He looked around pointedly. "I don't see any TV set here. As to the radio, I check the weather reports. In my line of work you get up before sunrise, work all day, and you're ready for bed directly after supper. No, I don't read newspapers. No time."

"Well said." Cunningham nodded, holstered the gun, stood up. "I guess they school you in your identity so you've got a background all ready to spill when you get questioned."

"You can check it out. Phone down there. The San Luis Obis-

po County Sheriff's substation in Madrone. They'll back it up."

"I don't have a phone, but I expect they would. They're standing by waiting for me to call. With all the answers." He watched out the window as Ford and Hadley brought the green pickup into the compound and parked it. He turned back and said almost pleadingly, "Look, if you hadn't carried that private investigator's license, I wouldn't keep you. I mean, Ford and Hadley aren't out there to take prisoners, just to keep strangers off, and without that darn license, I'd've let you go. But you're law enforcement. And law enforcement means only one thing to me: trouble, and worse than trouble." He glanced toward the map on the wall. "The end of all my plans for America." He wagged his head sorrowfully. "I can't take a chance with you."

"If I was here on government assignment, do you think I'd've carried that license? I left my gun at home. Why wouldn't I have left the license?"

"Don't know, but it would have been prudent."

"And would I have come alone?"

That got Cunningham's attention. He took off the dark glasses and narrowed his eyes. "Somebody out there, counting the minutes you're here, waiting to move in?"

Bohannon gave a small laugh. "Would I say so if there were?"

Cunningham sighed and pulled the gun again. He motioned with it, meaning Bohannon was supposed to go out the door. Bohannon

went out the door. Cunningham followed him and closed the door and pointed with the gun at one of the small buildings. "Keep you there," he said, "until I can decide what to do with you. Move."

Bohannon moved. Another blond youngster in camouflage pants, jacket, and combat boots came out of the storage building. He stopped, saluted Cunningham, and stared at Bohannon. "Who the hell is that?"

"Don't curse, Elroy, remember?"

"Forgot, captain, sir." He frowned hard at Bohannon. "He from the bank? I thought you said no prisoners."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cunningham said. "And neither do you. Shut up, Elroy. You finished that mimeographing yet?"

"Yes, sir," Elroy said, not looking away from Bohannon, plainly puzzled and worried by him. "But that f—I mean, that lousy Addressograph. That's real old, sir. Them cardboard stencils—they jam all the time. Can't we get a new one?"

"Get a rifle," said Cunningham, "see that it's loaded, and stand guard over this man until you're relieved. K building." And to Bohannon, "Over there, in the corner. March."

Elroy saluted and went back into the storage building, and out of the woods and into the open hardpan between the shacks came a teenage girl riding a tall, elegant, sorrel mare. The girl had long straight blonde hair,

wore a camouflage coverall too big for her and a floppy-brimmed camouflage hat. The mare was pregnant. On sighting the girl, Cunningham holstered the gun again and looked at his watch.

"Liberty," he said, "you've been gone too long. That means too far. That means you could have been seen. You want me to ground you?"

"No, Daddy," she said, patting the horse's neck, "we didn't go far."

"I doubt you know where you went," he said. "All right, you sponge her down now, clean her hooves, give her some oats, be sure she has water. Having your own horse means responsibility, hard work."

"I love looking after her," she said, and tilted her head at Bohannon. "Who are you? Is that your truck? With the horsehead on it?"

Bohannon said it was. "I keep a dozen horses on my place. She's about ready to foal, you know. You don't want to go too far with her. She could need help when her time comes."

"Help?" Cunningham snorted. "She's an animal. Instinct will—"

"She's not a cayuse," Bohannon said. "She's a Thoroughbred. Centuries of breeding. They can't survive without human help."

The girl said, "I know what to do. My horse book has got a whole chapter about it."

"Just the same," Bohannon said, "I'd keep her in her stall from here on out. With plenty of fresh dry straw."

"I know what to do," the girl repeated sulkily, reached down from the saddle, swung open a wide door, and rode the mare into the storage building. Looking after her, Bohannon glimpsed fifty-pound sacks of fertilizer, a truckload of them. Not to grow food. Not around here. They were labeled AMMONIUM NITRATE. He got a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. There must be a ton of it. What was Cunningham going to blow up? The entire state?

"How did you come by a horse like that?" he said.

"Liberty wanted a horse, wouldn't leave me alone about it. You know how they nag." Cunningham grunted. "I took her in payment for a debt. No bargain. She'd never won a race."

Bohannon shrugged. "Maybe her foal will be a winner."

Cunningham's laugh was brief. "Another mouth to feed," he said. "Move."

The K building held a cot with a rolled-up sleeping bag on it, a tubular patio chair whose webbing a sun in a different climate had long ago bleached to gray and whose metal time and weather had pitted.

A set of battered veneered bookshelves had new-looking books on them. *The Turner Diaries*, *The Anarchist Cookbook*, *Christian Identity*, *Edible Wild Plants of the West*, *The Improvised Munitions Handbook*. Multiple copies. And brown-wrapped parcels, probably of the same books. A

kerosene lantern with a smoke-smudged chimney, a single window with a huge tree trunk right up against it. No way out. Bohannon stood studying the room. Cunningham, from the open doorway, studied him. "Think I ought to chain you up?" he said.

Bohannon smiled. "Save yourself the trouble. Let me go."

Cunningham ignored that. "No, I don't think, with Elroy outside with his Uzi, you'll try to make a break. Anyway, the woods are full of my troops. You wouldn't get far."

"All night?" Bohannon said.

"All night, all day. Don't give it another thought. Read." Cunningham nodded at the bookcase. "*The Turner Diaries*. It will open your mind." He backed down the two short steps that led up to the door, began to close the door, and then said, "Anyway, you won't be here long. Just till I see if you're useful. If not, you won't be here at all."

Bohannon's brows went up. "In what way useful?"

"As a bargaining chip," Cunningham said and closed the door. It had a heavy slide bolt; Bohannon heard him rattle it into place. Cunningham said through the door, "If nature calls, just ask Elroy to take you. Elroy?"

"Sir," Elroy said.

Lunch when Elroy brought it was a wiener sandwich and a glass of milk. He wasn't sure what the milk tasted like but not milk. Powdered milk. He remembered the boxes stacked on the kitchen floor. The meat tasted

like a hot dog, any hot dog. Mustard. Ketchup. Sweet relish. And the bread itself was good, fresh-baked, still a little warm. A treat. And he was hungry and finished the sandwich off in gulps, and the chocolate bar that lay beside it on the plate. A half hour afterward, when the bolt slid and the door opened, it was Cunningham's woman, Selina, who came to collect the plate and glass.

"That was good." Bohannon stood to hand them to her.

"You'll get damn tired of hot dogs," she said.

"Don't you mean darn?" he said with a little smile.

"Yes, I mean darn," she said and smiled back.

"And what did you mean when you said bad timing?"

"I meant sometimes we're busy around here." She wasn't going to stay and chat. She opened the door. "Tomorrow will be one of those times."

"All the more reason to let me go my way," Bohannon said.

"A sane person would think so." She went out and bolted the door.

And Bohannon lay on his bunk and read *The Turner Diaries*, which made clear on page after sneering, blustering, bloodthirsty page what the woman had meant. No admirer of this book could possibly be sane. If she knew that, why did she stay?

Elroy knocked at five and woke him. While reading he had drifted into a troubled sleep filled with murder, mayhem, bombings, and

by contrast the quiet of the compound under its enormous trees was almost welcome. The blond kid brought in a battered old cafeteria tray. On it was a plate with beans and franks, a ketchup bottle, two slices of buttered bread on a side plate, another glass of milk, and a bowl of red Jell-O. Bohannon sat up on the edge of the bed, and Elroy handed him the tray. He studied him.

"You all right?"

"Nightmares." Bohannon set the tray on his knees and ran his fingers through his hair. "You know what the psychology books say about nightmares?"

"No, sir," Elroy said.

"The only ones who have them are children and artists."

"That right? I never did hear that. Which one are you?"

Elroy was brighter than Bohannon had expected. "Neither one, so I guess that makes the psychology books wrong, doesn't it?" He was hungry again and tilted ketchup over the beans and franks and filled his mouth. "What's this mimeographing you're doing for the captain?"

"*Ninth Amendment Bulletin*," Elroy said. "The captain writes it; Miz Cunningham, she types the stencils; and I make the copies."

"And address the envelopes?" Bohannon took a bite of the bread. It was good again. "You complained about the Addressograph."

"I address 'em and stuff 'em," Elroy said wearily. "Takes forever."

"Big mailing list, is it?" Bohannon took a swallow of milk.

"I guess I better not tell you that." The boy wandered to the open door and, rifle cradled in his arms, stood there gazing out at the dying daylight through the trees. "Even if they are going to kill you."

Bohannon blinked. "I thought they were going to trade me off."

"Trade you off?" Elroy turned around. "For what? For who?"

Bohannon shrugged. "A bargaining chip, that's what the captain called me. Where do you mail all these copies of your bulletin? Coeur d'Alene?"

"Hell, no. That would give away where we're at, here."

"I guess it might at that." Bohannon continued to down the beans and franks and bread. "So what do you do about that?"

"Pack 'em all in a carton and truck 'em to Tacoma, and they forward the carton to Omaha or maybe El Paso or Enid, Oklahoma, and they take the envelopes out of the carton and mail 'em from there. Except sometimes it's Columbus, Georgia. Or San Diego."

"Must make getting contributions a little chancy," Bohannon said.

"I don't know. The captain—he's the one worries about the mail. I just follow orders." He sat down in the doorway, the rifle across his knees. Bohannon wondered if he could take the necessary six or eight steps silently enough to catch Elroy's thin neck in the crook of his arm and render him unconscious but guessed that even if he could there might be someone in the compound, or

looking out a window, who would see him and shoot him for his trouble. He finished off the Jell-O, the last inch of milk, set aside the tray, slid the spoon into his boot, and lit a cigarette.

Elroy turned. "Say, how did you get to keep those? The captain don't allow smoking. No tobacco, no beer, no swearing . . ."

Bohannon held out the pack. "You want one?"

"I'm dyin' for one." Elroy came and got a cigarette and leaned for Bohannon to light it with a plastic throw-away lighter. "Oh, good," the boy said, blowing smoke away with a deep, grateful sigh. "Oh yes."

"Not even rock and roll," said Bohannon. "What does the Ninth Amendment Militia do for fun?"

"Fun?" Elroy stared at him with an odd half smile. "Oh, mister. We're gonna have our fun tomorrow." He went back to the doorway and stood leaning there, looking out, enjoying the cigarette and chuckling to himself. "Oh yeah. We're gonna have real fun tomorrow."

"You mentioned a bank."

"Bank?" The boy turned, scowling. "Oh, you are for sure gonna be killed. You know way too much."

Bohannon put out his cigarette on the floor. "You going to rob a bank? Is that your idea of fun?"

"You got it backward, like most everybody," Elroy said. "It's the banks that are the robbers." He threw away his cigarette and turned. "Anyways, we ain't about money. We're about takin' this

country back from the Jews and lawyers and niggers and immigrant trash from Mexico and China and all them and givin' it back to the white people the way God meant in the first place. And we ain't a militia, either. We're a family."

Bohannon smiled thinly. "That just happens to carry guns at all times."

"We're embattled," Elroy said. "We tell the people of this country how things really are, and the rich and powerful don't like it. They'll kill us if they can. Them and their bought-and-paid-for army and FBI and all. We got to defend ourself, we got to defend the truth." He reached out. "I'll take that tray now. You need to go to the outhouse?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Bohannon said.

He lit the lamp and read about wild plants you could eat without poisoning yourself. It was more cheerful reading than *The Turner Diaries*, and he thought it might be useful if he could get away from here and past Cunningham's circle of fire and make his way by shank's mare to civilization, if there was civilization anywhere. He wasn't going to be able to memorize all this stuff, so he guessed he would take the book along. It was not going to be that hard to get out of here after all. The floor planks were indifferently nailed down. Using the spoon with patience, persistence, and main strength, he could pry up one plank with difficulty and

another without difficulty. There was two feet of crawlspace under the shack. From there under cover of darkness he could creep into the ferns and brush beneath the trees and, if he went carefully, get back to the main road. Then he—

The bolt on the door rattled, the door opened, Selina came in. She pointed a Browning 9mm pistol at him. In a worn and weary way, she was beautiful in the lamplight. "I'd like the spoon back," she said.

"Shucks," he said and reached into his boot for it. He stood up to hand it over to her. "A feller can't have any fun around here."

She took the spoon and put it into a pocket of her jeans. She assumed a Colonel Klink accent. "No vun escapes from Stalag Thirteen."

"No one ever got shot at Stalag Thirteen, either," he said.

"Life is not television." She backed to the door. Hand on the knob, she asked, "You need anything? Other than a crowbar?"

"How is Liberty's mare?" he said. "Liberty your daughter?"

She gave a short laugh. "She was, when I carried her in my belly. Since then she has had only one parent. Strange but true. And he has had only one true love. If anything happened to me, I doubt he'd notice. If anything happened to Liberty—God help us all."

"And if anything happened to him?" Bohannon asked.

Alarm flickered across her face, but she said stoutly, "He's

not the kind of man things happen to. He makes things happen."

"That can be dangerous. Especially if you can't think straight."

"You're not talking about Chet Cunningham," she said.

"He's crazy, and you know it," Bohannon said.

"He's the sanest man in America." She pulled open the door.

"That's not an answer, that's a slogan. You're too bright for that."

"It's the truth," she said.

"He plans to shoot me," Bohannon said. "You going to let him do that?"

"You're not afraid," she said scornfully. "You were never afraid in your life. I know your kind. I married one."

"So you are going to let him shoot me?"

She took one step down. "That's between the two of you."

"Only if we both have guns." Bohannon held out his hand for the 9mm.

She smiled faintly and shook her head. "You want him to shoot me, too? How would that help?"

Bohannon sat on the cot.

"What about the horse?"

"Still pregnant."

She took the second step down, pulled the door shut, and bolted it.

Clattering and banging woke him. Through the cracks in the siding of building K he saw light. He smelled gasoline. Young male voices called to each other. A starter mechanism whinnied, an

engine clattered to life, died out, started up again. Another. The tailgate of a pickup truck banged shut, its chains rattling. More engines started. Cunningham barked orders and admonitions. There was a chorus of "Yessirs," and there was also laughter. Everybody sounded keyed up. The large door of the storage building slammed shut. The cars, trucks, vans began driving out of the compound. Right past him.

He crawled out of the sleeping bag and, through the crack between door and frame, caught glimpses of jittering headlights, red taillights. He peered at his watch. Two thirty A.M. That busy tomorrow he'd heard about from Elroy and Selina started early, didn't it? A car braked, its door opened, someone came to his door, rattled the bolt, pushed the door open.

"You're awake," Cunningham said.

"It's nice of you to invite me out," Bohannon said, "but I'll need time to choose a frock. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest you read this." Cunningham held out Ada Tanner's Bible. "And meditate on it. Try the Twenty-third Psalm. That's the one the padre usually reads to condemned men. That and the part about 'I am the resurrection and the life.'"

Bohannon took the book. "Thoughtful of you," he said. "Appreciate it." He peered past the captain. "You taking my truck?"

"Spoils of war," Cunningham said.

"As Mrs. Napoleon said before Waterloo, when will you be back?"

"Forget it," Cunningham said.

"This won't be Waterloo."

"If you were sure of that, you'd shoot me now."

Cunningham drew a breath to answer and didn't answer. He pulled the door shut, bolted it, and Bohannon listened to his footsteps cross the hardpan, heard the springs of the truck squeak slightly as the man climbed into it, heard the door slam, the parking brake let go, heard the gears grind because Cunningham didn't know this vehicle, and heard it drive away.

After that the silence of the forest night came and settled on the place, and he felt the high mountain cold, laid the Bible on the bookcase, crawled back into the sleeping bag, and, when he had stopped shivering, went to sleep. In a dream George Stubbs sat at the round kitchen table in the ranchhouse with his big drawing pad. He drew well for a man with no training. But he rarely drew anything but horses, and Bohannon took his hobby for granted and wasn't watching.

"Here it is," Stubbs said. "This is what you want." And he held up the pad for Bohannon to see. A horse's head in silhouette. "Now, ain't that just the ticket?"

And then Bohannon was awake in K building of Cunningham's compound, hundreds of miles from that kitchen, wondering what woke him. "The ticket to what, George?" he said, and worked his way out of the sleeping bag again

and went to the door. He stood by the door listening. It was unnaturally quiet. If a guard was out there, he wasn't breathing. "Elroy?" he said. No answer.

Then he realized what he had heard that woke him. The bolt. He turned the knob and very gently pulled the door. It came open. His heart began thumping. He peered out. No Elroy. No light showed in the house across the way. She'd come in the dark, hadn't she, and gone back in the dark, and if she was watching from over there, she was watching from the dark. He smiled to himself. He'd had her figured right, after all. She wasn't going to let Cunningham kill him. Now, with all the longhaired boys with guns and grenades gone off with the sanest man in America, she was letting Bohannon walk away.

He put on his boots, jacket, hat, returned to the door, opened it, and stood with it open for a wary moment in the darkness and the silence and the cold. Then he took a step down. And waited. And another step. And waited. He wished to hell his truck was still here. He wished for a compass. For a map. For a flashlight. He made his way to the rear of K building and into the brooding, ancient darkness of the giant trees. He wanted to run. There wasn't much in the way of undergrowth to impede that. Only ferns. But there was no safe way to go fast.

Hands held out in the hope of not running into low branches, he started off. Was he heading

for the state highway? Did it matter? He was putting Cunningham's camp behind him. Bark and sharp twigs kept scraping his hands. They'd be bloody before the night was out. Then they met something else. Fabric, and under the fabric, flesh and bone.

"Who the hell?" a voice said. A gun barrel poked his belly. A flashlight beam glared in his eyes. "Jesus Christ," the voice said. "How did you get out?"

"Don't you mean Judas Priest?" Bohannon said. "The door was open. I figured that meant I'd overstayed my welcome."

"Turn around." The gun barrel jabbed him again. "Go back."

And he went back, and was pushed into K building so hard he lost his footing and fell. And the door slammed. And the boy bolted the door. Disgusted, Bohannon clambered to his feet. She'd miscounted, hadn't she? Hadley had been left behind, cut out of the fun. Poor Hadley'd have to hear about Armageddon secondhand over breakfast.

But no one was back for breakfast. At six in the morning, the camp remained vacant and still. He heard the hooves of Liberty's horse pass. Dimly from across the way he heard coal dumped into the old cookstove. Hadley was red-eyed when he came with an M-16 to escort Bohannon to the outhouse. "You should get some sleep," Bohannon told him.

"If I'd slept last night," Hadley

said, "you'd be in Coeur d'Alene by now."

"I don't understand how the captain could have left my door unbolted."

"He had a lot on his mind," Hadley said.

Back at K building Bohannon said, "You can sleep now."

"Not me," Hadley said sourly. "Gotta watch you. You're tricky."

"Not if you remember the bolt," Bohannon said.

Hadley closed the door and rammed the bolt to. "I got nothing on my mind. Just you."

Selina brought his breakfast on another of those battered cafeteria trays. It was scrambled eggs and Spam, toast and jam, a mug of coffee.

"You tried to leave us last night," she said. "I thought you'd get tired of hot dogs. But not so soon." She held out the tray. "In contrition I've brought you something different. Not better, just different."

He took the tray from her. "Appreciate the thought."

"The eggs are powdered," she said. "How did you get out?"

He looked at her. "You don't know? Somebody forgot to bolt the door."

"Hadley had stepped into the trees to relieve himself," she said. "It's lucky you happened to meet up with him."

"Not for me." Bohannon sat on the bed with the tray on his lap and began eating. The eggs had no taste at all, but they were hot and there was a good heap of

them. The Spam tasted like salt. The jelly tasted like no known fruit or berry, but the bread was good and so was the coffee. She was still standing there. The Browning was tucked into her belt. He wiped his mouth on a paper napkin. "I ought to have chosen a different way out, right?"

Her smile was bleak. "So it seems."

"Hadley the only man left in camp?"

"That would be telling," she said. "Anyway, I saw you leave. I'm a very light sleeper when Chet's away."

"Meaning you're worried." Bohannon held out his pack of cigarettes and saw her eyes light up. "When's he due back?"

She took a cigarette. "First, I am not worried. Chet knows what he's doing and just how to do it. Second, he'll be back when he's done it."

"And did you take aim at me from your window?" Bohannon held out his lighter, hoping she would bend close to take the light and he could get the Browning away from her. She didn't bend. She took the lighter, backed off a couple of steps, lit her cigarette, tossed the lighter back to him.

"Thank you. That's good. A luxury we can't afford. Among many." She blew smoke away gratefully, watched Bohannon light his cigarette, and said, "No. I scrambled down from the loft, got my gun—" she touched the butt of the gun now "—and opened the front door. I was furious that Hadley had left his post.

I wanted to run after you but—” she laughed at herself grimly “—I’d forgotten my boots. And while I dithered about that, Hadley brought you back.”

“To your enormous relief,” Bohannon said, watching her steadily.

She nodded. “Of course,” she said, but she flushed a little.

“I suggested to Liberty she keep the mare in her stall until she foals, but I heard her ride out earlier.”

“Liberty takes suggestions only from her father,” Selina said.

“I hope she’s back before the colt decides to arrive.” Bohannon stood up to pass the tray over.

Selina took it one-handed and backed off, her other hand on the butt of the Browning. “Why not the filly?”

“No reason,” Bohannon smiled. “What’s the dam’s name?”

“Paprika. For her color. She raced as Nonstop-shopper.”

Bohannon grunted. “Racing people drink too much.”

Selina shrugged. “She never did stop. She just didn’t run very fast.”

“Why should she?” Bohannon said. “Every horse is not a fool.”

The compound was still empty at noon. “Bohannon,” Selina called. “Sit on the cot and stay there.” Her boots knocked the steps. She slid back the bolt and pushed open the door. She set the tray on the floor to one side. “Wait,” she said, “until you hear me bolt the door before you come for that.”

“Where’s Hadley?” Bohannon asked.

She shut the door and bolted it. “Don’t worry. You’re under guard.”

Bohannon went and picked up the tray. “You mean by you? Where did Hadley go? Why did Hadley go?”

Maybe she stood there in the pine-splintered sunlight, thinking about answering, but she didn’t answer. In a moment he heard her boots crossing the compound away from him. “They are late, aren’t they?” he shouted. “Something went wrong.”

It didn’t provoke her. Not to speech. And he sat on the cot and ate canned chili not quite heated through. No fresh homebaked bread this time. A few stale soda crackers, that was all. And the usual glass of watery milk. He didn’t hear the door to the house. He heard the door to the warehouse cum stable. And then in the hush, the startup of an automobile engine. Muffled. He had noticed on his brief escape attempt last night that all the junkyard vans, pickups, RV’s had gone off with Cunningham’s expeditionary forces. Except for the red runabout, of course. That would never go anywhere again. So the car he was hearing had been stored out of sight, indoors, hadn’t it? He knocked with the handle of the spoon hard on a knothole. The knot fell out. He knelt and put his eye to the hole. And saw the car roll out of the warehouse. It looked new. Then it was out of his line of vision.

But his ears told him it had

come this way. Moving too fast. It braked hard, the tires squealing on the hardpan. They kicked up dust. He smelled the dust. The horn blared. "Liberty!" Selina shouted. "Liberty! Come home." The horn blared again. "Damn," she said, and, leaving the motor idling, got out of the car, and he knew from the sound of her steps she was running. Into the house, out again, opening and closing the doors of the van, throwing things into the van, stopping for a moment with each load to lean on the horn. It trumpeted into the somber forest and echoed back. She shouted each time, "Liberty! Come home." And her voice echoed also and sounded lonely.

He called, "Shall I go fetch her?"

"I can't trust you," she said. But she came and opened the door and looked at him. She was holding the Browning. "You're the enemy."

He shrugged. "Hostilities are over. Aren't they?"

"Never," she said. "I'll find her myself, thanks."

But it wasn't necessary. Liberty had heard. And Liberty had come. Not riding her beloved Paprika. Leading her. And Bohannon saw why. The foal had shifted inside her. She looked twice as pregnant as before. Her bag was swollen. "She's going to foal, Mama." Liberty was pale. "Any minute now."

Bohannon asked, "Is her stall cleaned out? No junk on the floor? How big is it? She'll need room to

walk around. No cracks the baby can put his legs through? Plenty of fresh straw?" He stepped forward. "I'd better look it over."

"Stay where you are," Selina said. And to Liberty, "Take her inside. I'll be along in a minute." Jerking the pistol at him, she told Bohannon, "Back off. Way back. That's it." And she pulled the door shut and bolted it.

Through the planks he called: "How many foals have you delivered?"

She didn't answer. The engine of the van quit. The huge, primeval silence of the place was back. He stretched out on the cot. You never knew about broodmares. They could drop their young before you could catch your breath. Or they could keep you waiting for hours. He closed his eyes.

What woke him was so unexpected he didn't open his eyes. He lay and held his breath, straining to hear because the sound was far off. The beat of helicopter rotors. He opened his eyes, lunged at the bookcase, and pawed the load of books off the first shelf. As he had thought, the shelf lay on pegs. It fit tightly, though, and he had to bang it with a fist from underneath to get it loose. He rammed with the end of it hard at the siding planks in the corner. The builders hadn't spared nails. With all his strength he banged at them again. The whole of K building shuddered. But the planks didn't give. He kept ramming at them with the bookshelf, in a sweat to

get out where that chopper could see him.

"What are you doing?" He turned. Selina stood in the open doorway. With the Browning leveled at him. "Drop the board," she said.

He laid the board on the cot. "I was getting worried about the foal."

"The man who loves horses," she said with a thin smile, "better than he loves freedom."

"What's happening?" he said.

"Nothing, but Liberty's too stressed to be out there alone with her, and I have packing to do."

Bohannon sat down and put on his boots.

"I noticed. Once she's through delivery, you plan to leave the horse and colt?"

"Maybe before," Selina said. "There are bigger issues at stake here than one little girl and her pet racehorse."

"We won't tell Elizabeth Taylor," Bohannon said.

He stood with Liberty outside the box stall. He was relieved that it was roomy and clean and that good daylight came from overhead. At times like this you had to be able to see clearly. "She gets up," Liberty said, "then she walks around. Then she lies down again. Now look. See her shudder? Look. She never holds her tail straight out like that. Look, Bohannon. She's kicking at her belly." The girl was trembling. He gave her a quick hug.

"It's all right. It's perfectly natural."

With a heavy thump and a heavy sigh, the broody mother lay down again, then scrambled up, rolling her eyes, and there was a rush of amniotic fluid, gallons of it. From out in the compound Selina shouted, "What was that?"

"She broke her water," Bohannon called. "Now the serious stuff begins."

"I think I'm going to throw up," Liberty said. But instead she cried.

One of the captain's favorite accommodations, a wood and canvas collapsing cot, was in this cubby beside the horse's stall, and Bohannon picked the weeping girl up and laid her on it. Whimpering, she curled tight, her face to the board wall. He covered her with an army blanket. "Everything's going to be fine," he told her.

Everything *was* fine. Eight or ten minutes later the mare was on her feet again and a long, slim leg stuck out beneath her tail, the blunt head of the foal with it. He breathed easier. The newborn's hoof had pierced the amniotic sack. The rest of the sack would slip away with the mare's contractions as they came. Or should. If not, he'd have to step in there and pull it off the nostrils so it could begin to breathe. An instant later the mare contracted again, the foal's nostrils were free, and it began to struggle.

"Liberty, come on," Bohannon

turned, threw the blanket off, shook the girl awake. "You don't want to miss this. It may be the only miracle you'll ever see." He got her to her feet. She was numb the way a child is, roughly roused from sleep. He steered her by the shoulders. "Here. Stand here. Look. Look."

The foal struggled. The mare slowly, a little stunned, bending her graceful neck, reached around to help. The foal wriggled mightily, then dropped with a thump into the straw, legs sprawling. It was always a shock, the unbelievable length of a newborn foal's legs. Those were what a horse was all about, and this was the moment when that showed itself to the veriest fool. A horse was born for one thing only. A horse was born to run. The mare turned and bent to lick her newborn dry.

"She did it all herself," Liberty looked up at Bohannon, wonder in her eyes. "Just like Daddy said."

"Whatever happened to Daddy?" Bohannon said.

Liberty didn't hear. "I have clean towels to help her clean him up and dry him off." She turned away.

"She's doing fine," Bohannon said. "Let her do it. Come back. Watch."

Cleanup over, the mare began nudging the gangly little horse to urge it to its feet. It put those sticklike legs out, this way, that way, and trembling, teetering, began to stand. The dam put her elegant nose under to help.

"Wonderful!" Liberty clapped in delight.

And the little creature collapsed. It took two more tries, then he was firmly footed and his mother was nudging his butt with its damp whisk of tail to point him along to where her milk was waiting for him.

"Excuse me." Bohannon stepped out the big door into the golden sunlight slanting through the pines and, away from the hazards of straw and ammonium nitrate manure, lit a cigarette. Selina was across the way, setting a heavy cardboard storage file in the van. "You lose," he shouted. "It's a colt."

"This is not a woman's world." Selina slammed the van doors, climbed behind the wheel, started the engine. "Come on, Liberty. Time to leave. Your father will be frantic." She brought the van around in a quick circle to where Bohannon stood. Panic edged her voice. "Liberty, we have to go."

Bohannon raised his eyes. The helicopter was back. From high up, its jittery shadow flickered across the compound. "Forget it," he told her.

"What are you talking about? Liberty! Come out here: Right now."

Liberty appeared in her floppy camouflage coverall and hat. "I'm not going. You go on without me. Mama—he's just born. He can hardly walk. Anything could happen. And Paprika? After what she's been through?" Liberty waved her arms. "I'm her friend. I can't leave her. She trusts me."

"There's feed, there's water." Selina jumped down and came for the girl. "They'll be all right till we can send for them. A day, two days. What can happen?" She grabbed Liberty's wrist. "Come on now. Before it's too late."

Bohannon touched her, jerked his chin up. "It's already too late."

"Let me go!" Then she saw, and the starch went out of her. "Oh no."

Bohannon opened his mouth to speak, and a pickup truck banged noisily into the compound and slurred to a halt on the hardpan, kicking up a cloud of dust. The green pickup with the horsehead on the door. Bohannon's pickup. Ford jumped out of it clutching his AK-47. He came running toward them, wild with excitement and fear. "Where's the captain?"

"That's dried blood," Selina said. "Are you hurt?"

"No, but a lot of other people are. Hell, they're dead. I killed a lot of people, Miz Cunningham." He began to cry. "I wasn't supposed to. Nobody was supposed to kill anybody, just like hold them real quiet." He shook his head in agony. "I didn't mean it. But this nigger, this big security guard, he wouldn't stand still like I said, and he ran at me and I shot him and the gun kept on running and everybody in the place fell down, and, oh—" He dropped to his knees in the dust, head bowed, sobbing. "God forgive me for what I done." Then he was on his feet again, half crouched and staring all around.

"Where's the captain? Where's everybody?"

"Not here," Selina said. She was very pale, and she was hanging onto Liberty, frightened by this maniac, but her voice stayed calm, the voice of the captain's lady. "You know what the orders were. If anything went wrong, no one was to return here. What's the matter with you, Ford?"

"He said he'd protect me," Ford said, "wouldn't let nothin' happen to me. Always promised us that. He'd look after us, all of us. And now look." He waved upward wildly at the helicopter. "They're after me, and they're going to get me and where is he? Where's the captain?"

"You stupid boy," she cried, "don't you understand? You've finished the captain. You've finished us all."

He stared at her, slack-jawed. Then he saw Bohannon, and his eyes lit up. "Oh no. Not all. Not me." Bohannon saw it coming, but he wasn't quick enough. He was past fifty. He could no longer move with the speed of the boy, and the boy caught him. "They can't take me. Not with a hostage. Come on." And he yanked and booted and hoisted Bohannon toward the truck, the rifle barrel at Bohannon's ear. It was awkward. He probably couldn't fire it if he tried, but Bohannon remembered the other morning on that lost roadway. The gun had gone off on its own. He didn't resist.

The boy slammed him against the cab.

"Open the door. Get in there."

And Bohannon did these things, and the next moment the boy was on the seat beside him, still clutching the AK-47. The engine revved. He clashed the gears. The pickup backed and slewed, going too fast. It braked, and the dust rose around them, blocking off the anxious faces of the two women. Then the truck raced ahead, moving off through the great trees, heading along the crooked little access trail, back to that dismal road.

But not all the way. An official car came ambling along to meet them. It stopped with its bumper against the bumper of the green pickup, and Ford said, "Hell," and two men in starchy tan uniforms got out of the car. It was a highway patrol car. They wore dark glasses, had their hair cropped tight around the ears, and looked about fifteen years old. Service revolvers were holstered on their hips, but they didn't seem about to draw these. They came ambling forward looking as if they meant no harm.

One of them called, "Mr. Bohannon, is it? Mr. Hack Bohannon? Green pickup with the horsehead on it? We been looking for you. Your friends down in California. They haven't heard

from you. They're worried about you. Sheriff's department?"

"He don't count." Ford put his head out the window. "He's just my hostage. Corporal Ford, Ninth Amendment Militia? I got a gun here." He stuck it out the window and waved it. "See that? That's what counts. Now, you get back in that gov'mint car and get it the hell out of my way."

The patrolmen stopped. One of them looked skyward. "Whatever you say, but they're watching all this from up there. You won't get far."

"This thing can blow them right out of the sky," Ford said, "after it blows you into the ground. I've already killed twenty people. What have I got to lose?"

The men put their hands up and backed submissively toward the patrol car. Hanging out the truck window, Ford watched them, grinning. "Way to go," he said. He had forgotten Bohannon. And Bohannon struck him with a chop across the nape of his thin, boy's neck. There was a crack of vertebrae. The boy's head drooped, and his cap fell off, and the AK-47 dropped to the roadway. Bohannon got out of the truck on the passenger side. He knew his smile was a little anemic, but he smiled it anyway.

"Good to see you," he said.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

As a private investigator I mostly meet the greedy, the vindictive, the suspicious, the offended, and the guilty looking for a quick out. The tall man who entered my cluttered office did not fit any of these categories. He was clean-shaven and neatly dressed, but his tense expression plainly spelled worry. "Mr. Lamont?" he began.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "Can I help you?"

"I really don't know. That is, I'm not sure *anyone* can help me."

"Let's get to your problem. First, who are you?"

"Sorry," he apologized. "I'm Duncan Poole. My company manufactures small parts and appliances. My problem is that lately we've been exactly a thousand dollars short each month."

"Seems easy enough to trace. Your bookkeeper should be able to find the overcharge."

"I'm afraid it's not quite that simple. Several years ago I somehow got talked into installing a computer system—a CBM Model S. It was supposed to take the place of a bookkeeper and seemed a good long-term investment. Now, however, I can't make head or tail of what's going on in my payroll."

I whistled softly. "That system was the Edsel of all computers, sir. People in the know termed it the Miser—takes everything in and gives nothing back."

"So you do know something about computer systems," Mr. Poole said hopefully. "My people in production have no access to the terminal, so they're in the clear. Either the damned computer is malfunctioning or someone in my office is embezzling. I don't want to accuse anyone falsely, so you see my quandary. Frankly, the situation has got to me."

"Just how many do you employ in your office? And what are their monthly salaries?"

"Mine is a relatively small company with a managerial staff of only six: an office manager at \$4500 a month, a private secretary at \$4200, a designer at \$4000, a typist at \$3800, a file clerk at \$3700, and a mailroom clerk at \$3500."

"Suppose," I suggested, "I check out your computer tonight, Mr. Poole. If I find nothing wrong with it, I'll visit your office for a few days. I could pose as a potential customer for your products."

"Fine!" he said. We agreed on my fee and shook hands.

With manual in hand, I checked the old CBM Model S thoroughly that night. The antiquated machine was still usable except for one thing: somebody had disconnected the information retrieval circuit. An inside job. No wonder Duncan Poole was at his wits' end.

"I was afraid it was something like that," he said when I reported to him the next morning.

It didn't take me long to learn that his staff consisted of three men and three women: Donald, Edward, Frank, Alice, Betty, and Cathy. Their last names were Gamble, Howe, Inman, Jolson, Kell, and Lange. In going over their personnel files I noted that they lived on Monarch Circle, Baron Boulevard, King Street, Princess Avenue, Queen Street, and Royal Avenue.

I watched them come to work. One person walked, one alighted from a streetcar, another came by bus. The other three drove their cars: a Buick, a Chevrolet, and a Volkswagen.

By the end of the second day I had also learned that—

(1) The three women employees were Ms. Jolson, the one living on Royal Avenue (whose last name wasn't Gamble), and the office manager.

(2) Donald, the one who drives the Chevrolet to work, and the mail-room clerk have the last names of Gamble, Howe, and Inman.

(3) Edward, the one who drives the Buick, and the designer live on Monarch Circle, Baron Boulevard, and King Street. The person living on King Street does not have the last name of Kell.

(4) Frank, the file clerk, and the one with the last name of Lange include the one who came by bus (who isn't Kell), the one who arrived by streetcar (who isn't Inman), and the one who walked to the office (who isn't Alice).

(5) The typist, the private secretary, and the designer include Donald, the person living on Royal Avenue, and the one driving the Volkswagen (who isn't Edward).

(6) Alice is neither the one driving the Chevrolet nor the one living on Monarch Circle (who is neither Donald nor the one with the last name of Kell).

(7) Gamble is not Frank (who doesn't live on Princess Avenue). Howe is not the one living on Queen Street (who doesn't walk to work). And Lange does not reside on Royal Avenue.

(8) The driver of the Buick is not the typist (who is not Cathy).

From this information I worked out the full names, addresses, and positions of the six employees. Mr. Poole checked my results.

"Now what?" he asked.

I went over to the machine, punched a few buttons, and produced a printout of last month's payroll. It began: Gamble . . . \$4200 / Howe . . . \$3800 / Inman . . . \$4000 / Jolson . . . \$4500 / Kell . . .

Duncan Poole stopped reading, his face pale. "It's worse than I thought," he declared sadly. "I have not one but *two* embezzlers on my payroll."

Who were the tricky pair who defrauded their employer?

.....

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The crown of Robert the Bruce was concealed behind the pink fireplace in the scullery of the great house in Elgin.

TOWN	DRAWING ROOM	DINING HALL	MASTER BEDROOM	SCULLERY	BUILT
1 Falkirk	grey	pink	red	ochre	1420
2 Breslin	red	brown	mottled	yellow	1340
3 Aberdeen	mottled	red	yellow	brown	1300
4 Elgin	yellow	grey	ochre	pink	1440
5 Cromarty	pink	yellow	brown	grey	1400
6 Dornoch	brown	ochre	pink	mottled	1320
7 Gairlock	ochre	mottled	grey	red	1360

FICTION

WHEN THE PIG GOT LOST

Anne Weston



Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 10/98

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“Curroochu-curroochu-curroochu!”
Silence.

“Curroochu-curroochu!” Efraín called again. The dense air of the rain forest absorbed his words. The strange low mist spread around him, hiding his body from the waist down. The dark trunks of the balsamo trees rose out of the whiteness like huge pillars supporting the sky.

The pig had to be in this shallow valley, under the fog. Efraín had searched everywhere else.

Normally the pig spent its days wandering the forest, eating fruit and roots. Near dusk it always trotted home and wedged itself between the two posts that formed the doorway of the house.

When Efraín had brought it home as a piglet—he’d traded a sack of cassava roots to the storekeeper in exchange—Sulema had made a nest of dry banana leaves in a corner of their house and allowed the piglet to sleep there. When it grew into a hog, they tried to make it sleep in the lean-to with the two cows. The pig kept rooting out, however, and returning to its corner in the house. Finally Efraín had made the doorway to their house narrower than the pig’s belly and left it loose at night. The hog would squeeze as far as it could into the doorway and sleep there.

But last night the hog hadn’t come home. Efraín wasn’t worried that a fer-de-lance had bitten it. He knew that the snake’s venom wouldn’t kill a pig, and he doubted that a jaguar would have taken it in the daytime. There were no other pigs in the area for it to have gone to visit. He hadn’t even seen its wild cousins the peccaries lately.

That left two possibilities: the pig had fallen in a hole or become tangled in a vine.

If it were still alive, the pig would answer Efraín’s call.

Efraín didn’t like the fog. Catalino the Indian would say that he was half in the underworld now, where cruel demons waited to trick men. Mist-walking was something a brash young man might do to dare the gods.

The hog, found alive and herded to market, would bring more money than he had ever held in his hand at one time. Efraín plodded on.

His foot hit something soft yet solid. Efraín almost fell on his face.

His heart sank. This wasn’t a rotten log. It had the thunk of flesh but didn’t cry out. The pig was dead.

He could never get the meat to market before it spoiled. He’d butcher what he could carry and take it home for Sulema to cure over a wood fire. Maybe he could trade some of the smoked meat to pay his bill at the store. Would he be able to see a little if he put his head down into the mist? Catalino would tell him not to. Sometimes Catalino knew things.

He'd better work blind, putting only his arms into the whiteness.

Efraín drew his knife from the sheath that hung from his rope belt. He had made the sheath from a piece of old hose that he'd found by the roadside on a trip to town last year. Efraín had puzzled over why anyone would throw away such a useful item, but town people did odd things.

He sharpened the knife blade with his file. Then he took a deep breath, leaned down, and stretched an arm into the mist to figure out how the hog lay. His hand faded and vanished, then his elbow. He tilted his head up to keep it above the fog.

His fingertips brushed the coarse bristles of the hog. Efraín placed his palm flat against the bristles to orient himself. More bristles, and an area of soft bare skin. A bump, a couple of hollows, bones near the surface, no blubber. Another hairy place but the hair was too long and soft to be pig bristles.

Efraín threw himself backwards and fell into the fog. The demon grabbed his ankle and yanked. Panicked, Efraín choked on the wet white air as though he were drowning. His hands tore at his ankle to fight free.

He had bent forward in his struggle and realized he could see the shadowy outline of his foot. He stopped struggling and put his head right next to his ankle. No monster tentacle held him. It was only a twist of vine, thin but tough. Efraín unwrapped it from his foot.

Now he knew he could see through the mist if he put his face close to things. That would help with what he had to do next.

First he had to find the knife. It had been in his left hand and he thought he'd dropped it, not thrown it, as he fell. On all fours, head lowered, Efraín swung his gaze over the dark ground. The decaying leaves made a springy spice-scented mulch. He found the knife.

He kept it handy while he crawled, looking for the body that was neither a hog nor a demon.

A long shape humped up in front of him. Efraín saw an arm and a khaki shirt. He moved his gaze from the shirt past the jeans down to the feet, clad in heavy leather boots. At last he looked back at the head. The man's hair was curly and as orange as a squirrel monkey's coat. Coarse stubble covered his jaw—what Efraín had mistaken for pig bristles. He lay on one side, facing away from Efraín.

Efraín touched the man's neck with his fingers and felt what shock had made him miss before: the man's skin was warm. He leaned over and laid his cheek by the man's nose. A faint puff of air brushed his eye. Had a fer-de-lance bitten him? Efraín ran his hands over the man's legs, the most likely place for a bite, looking for swelling.

Nothing.

He didn't smell of liquor, the second most probable cause for his unconsciousness.

Efraín pulled the man's shoulder toward him, straightening him onto his back. Then he saw the wound. Dark blood had globbed over one side of the chest. As he watched, a trickle of shiny red oozed through the clots. Its coppery smell stung his nose.

He sat back on his heels and let the mist isolate him while he thought. The most puzzling question—what was an orange-haired stranger doing here?—would have to wait. First he had to plan what to do.

He was close to Catalino's place, so where to take him was an easy decision. The man was too big for Efraín to carry, however. Efraín considered that problem.

He could get Catalino, and the two of them could carry the man. But suppose Catalino wasn't home? Even if he was, they'd have to poke around in the fog to locate the man again. It would all take time.

He leaned forward and rubbed the material of the khaki shirt between his fingers. It was new and strong.

Efraín unbuttoned the shirt, worked it off the body, then tied the sleeves under the man's arms. Then he took off his own thin shirt, wadded a corner, and stuffed it firmly into the spot where the fresh blood seemed to well out of a hole. He gripped the khaki shirt collar with both hands and stood up.

The low fog hid the man from Efraín. Walking backwards, he dragged his invisible burden toward Catalino's. It slid easily on the moist ground. The khaki shirt had a long tail—why such a waste of material? Efraín wondered—which would help protect the man's back.

They moved up the gentle slope, and the man emerged from the mist. Soon Efraín smelled woodsmoke. "Hey, Catalino," he called as he entered the clearing around his neighbor's home.

An old man, shorter than Efraín but stockier, appeared in the doorway. He looked at the orange-haired man, and his jaw dropped.

"He's hurt," Efraín said.

Catalino came over and took the man's legs. Together they carried him into the palm-thatched hut and laid him on the bare slats of the narrow wooden bed. The man was breathing evenly in spite of his rough journey. Efraín untied the khaki shirt and gently tugged it off.

Catalino lifted a round-bottomed clay jar from the ring of woven capulin twigs that held it upright on the dirt floor. He poured water onto the wound, working loose Efraín's shirt. "I found him near the balsamo trees," Efraín explained. "By the way, have you seen my pig?"

Catalino waved a hand toward a pot balanced on three flat rocks over a small fire, just outside the doorway. "If I had met a stray pig, you would be smelling chicharrones now instead of plain beans." He opened his eyes wide in the way he did when he was making a joke. "Bring the light here."

Except for the doorway, the windowless room was lit only by daylight that slipped between the cane siding. In the dimness Efraín saw a tin can on the chunk of tree trunk that served Catalino as table or chair, depending on which he needed at the moment. The can was half full of oil. A cotton wick slumped against the side. Efraín lit it with a match from his pocket and carried the lamp to the bedside.

Catalino, muttering now in his own language, used Efraín's shirt to wipe the dried blood from the skin. Efraín had picked up enough of the Indian's language to know that he did not think the stranger's condition was dangerous.

"Hold the light closer," the old man ordered.

Efraín obeyed. He and Catalino looked at the hole. Efraín moved the light to the other side, and they looked at it some more.

It still looked like a bullet hole.

"I heard this," Catalino said at last. "First I thought it was you, hunting. It didn't sound like your rifle, though. I wondered if it was those new people who settled behind me. I was surprised they had come so far from their place to hunt, but game's been scarce lately. That was soon after sunrise."

"I've been looking for the pig since dawn. I didn't take my rifle. Termites got into the stock, so I'm carving a new one."

Catalino checked the man's breathing. It was still shallow but regular. "What kind of wood are you using?"

"Ronron. I felled a big one last year. The wood was so beautiful I hated to see it just lie there in the field."

"A hard wood to work, but it'll last forever."

"That's what I hope . . . you know, I didn't hear any shot."

"The ridge would have blocked it from you." Catalino stepped outside, pulled the bean pot off the coals, and set the clay jug on. "Hot water will clean the wound better," he explained. "I'll need some of those ox-tongue leaves."

"The ones you used to stop the baby's nosebleed?"

"Yes. Sulema knows where the bush is."

"I'll go tell her. Anything else?"

"I don't think so. There's that *hombre grande* tree behind my house in case he gets a fever."

"I'll be right back."

Catalino coughed. "I heard two shots," he said.

Efraín glanced at the old man. He picked up the khaki shirt from the floor, gave it a shake, and laid it over the end of the bed.

Something fell from the pocket. Efraín picked it up: folded paper. He carried it to the door to see better.

There were two sheets of damp paper. One side of each sheet had markings. Efraín and Catalino studied them. After a while Efraín turned the paper the other way around.

"I know this word," he said, pointing to a set of small marks grouped together. "María. It was my mother's name. When I was little, I'd help her carry the clothes back from washing. She'd write her name in the mud by the river. I remember what it looked like."

"Do you know any of the other words?"

Efraín covered most of the paper with his hand and stared at the visible squiggles. He worked his way in a circle around the first page, then the second, but couldn't pick out any others he knew. On one page the letters had curlicues and ornate flourishes. On the other, the letters were short straight lines.

"I only know a couple of other words, and I don't see them here. Sulema can read it when she comes." He laid the papers on a rock to dry.

When he reached his own house, Sulema was stirring a pot of beans over the outdoor fire. The baby dozed in a woven sling that Sulema had hung from a tree branch the way Catalino said his people did.

There was no sign of the hog.

Efraín explained the situation with the strange man.

Sulema balanced her stir-stick across the top of the pot. Leaving the beans to simmer, she lifted the baby's pouch off the branch and slung it across her back. The baby blinked, yawned, and went back to sleep.

"The ox-tongue is this way," Sulema explained. Efraín followed her to the plant and pulled the branches down so she could pick the big sandpapery leaves. She folded them inside a softer leaf and tucked the packet into the sling with the baby, and they walked on.

Sulema glided through the forest like an ocelot, Efraín thought. Her bare feet were soundless on the soft ground while he clumped along in old rubber boots.


Things were well under way at Catalino's. A greyish paste filled the shallow grinding stone near the fire. Sulema hung the baby on a house-post and came over to observe the preparations.

"I mashed up some of those big orange seeds," Catalino explained. "My mother always said they made a wound heal faster. You know the ones, from the tree that looks like a boa constrictor standing on its tail holding an umbrella."

Sulema laughed. "Yes, I know that tree. What's it called?"

Catalino stared at the paste. For a moment he looked lost. "I can't remember what she called it," he finally said. He scraped the paste onto a section of clean banana leaf and carried it inside.

While Sulema and Catalino doctored the stranger, Efraín set the beans back on the fire and found a stout stick to leave with Sulema. He checked the sky and felt a faint breeze. By now the mist should have sunk back into the earth, returning the valley to the kingdom of men.



Once the stranger was settled, he and Catalino would of course go to the valley and get on the track of whoever had shot him, to make sure the person had left the area. There was no great hurry to go after him. Most likely he was a countryman of the orange-haired man, unaccustomed to the rain forest, so Efraín and Catalino would have no trouble catching up with him. They would stay just out of his sight until he was well away, then come back.

The papers were still on the rock. They might tell something about the stranger and what he was doing so far from his own land.

Efraín peered in the doorway and saw that Sulema and Catalino were almost finished. The man was still unconscious. "Would you read these papers when you come out, Sulema?" Efraín asked.

Efraín watched Sulema read. She knew right away how to hold the paper. She began at the top of one page and worked her way to the bottom. Then she repeated the process with the other page.

"They say the same thing," she said. "One paper is a lot easier to read. I think that on the easy page someone was trying to figure out what the hard page says. See all the gaps? In those places the person couldn't understand the words in fancy writing."

"Does it tell who the orange-haired man is?" Efraín asked.

"No, nothing about him." Sulema rubbed the page with the elaborate writing. "I've seen paper like this," she said. "When you want to make a copy of another paper, you put it on a machine like a big box and push a button. Then a photograph of that page comes out of the machine, on this kind of paper." Sulema had been to the city once, before Efraín met her, and had observed many things. She often entertained him with stories about sights she'd seen there. They were interesting things, but for the most part he didn't see that they had much practical value.

"What does it say?" he asked.

"I think it's part of a letter that started on another page. First the writer explains that he and his companions are hurt. He's going to give the letter to someone who will slip away in the night and take it to the mission of Our Lady Mary Queen of Angels, *María Reina de los Angeles*. The fathers are to send it on to someone else—" she pointed to a phrase—"your majesty." The writer says, 'As a final gift from your humble and devoted servant,' some words I can't read, 'the location of this treasure,' some more words, 'that some other expedition, better-armed and more blessed by fortune . . . ' Then he writes, 'Though our interpreter is not from this region and does not understand all that the natives say, I believe the cache contains precious gems and gold ornaments. . . . They received us with hospitality until we became too curious about their treasure. As I write this letter, I see the hill they call the Source of Wealth, which we were not allowed

to climb. From that hill comes the great tribute that they render yearly to their overlords.'

"Then the writer gives directions to this section of coast. He talks about a jagged rock like a shark's tooth that stands between the ocean and the land."

"That would be the rock before you get to the store," Efraín put in.

"From there you walk south to the next point, then turn toward where the July sun rises and walk two thousand paces. Then you see the 'Hill of the Source of Wealth.'"

Efraín considered. "I think this is July. That would put someone about where I found the stranger."

"And it explains why he didn't pass our house," Sulema said. "Following those directions, he'd miss the trail."

"What else does it say?" Efraín asked.

"That this source will provide its guardians with wealth through all the cycles of time." Sulema set down the papers.

"He'll be awake by the time we get back," Catalino told Efraín as they approached the little valley. The mist had vanished. Bases exposed, the balsamo trunks now stood firmly rooted in the earth.

Efraín waved his hand toward a small hill that rose sharply to one side. "You think a treasure's really up there?"

Catalino looked at the hill, then around the valley. He widened his eyes. "I think it *was* up there."

"And someone took it?"

Catalino raised his eyebrows. "No one *took* it."

"But it's not there any more."

"Not up *there*, no."

"Gold and jewels wouldn't walk away on their own, or rust or spoil."

"As the letter said, the treasure will endure through all the cycles of time."

Efraín sighed. The old man was enjoying himself. He would have to wait to learn the secret of the treasure.

With the fog gone, it would be easy to see the place where the stranger had lain. Yes, here the leaves were disturbed over an area the size of a person. From that spot, a wide swath cut through the leaves in the direction of Catalino's place.

"That's where I found the stranger," Efraín said.

Catalino stared at a point beyond. Efraín followed his gaze.

A man lay among churned-up leaves at the end of a rotten log.

They approached. This man was clearly dead. Like the stranger he was big, but his hair was brown instead of orange. He lay on his back, head nearer them, feet by the log.

Also like the stranger this man had a bullet hole in his chest.

Efraín and Catalino squatted down and looked at him.

On the ground close to the body lay a large knapsack and a dark steel pistol.

Efraín returned to where the orange-haired man had lain. A similar, slightly larger weapon gleamed dully from under the leaves, like a fer-de-lance poised to strike.

A small folding shovel, its blade clean and shiny, was attached to the knapsack. Efraín unhooked it and began to dig the grave.

"Do you think the other man will want to see him?" he asked.

"Who knows their customs? But the hurt man won't be able to walk anytime soon."

"We'll go ahead and bury this one, then."

They checked the man's pockets for anything personal in case a relative came in search of him someday. Catalino leaned him over so Efraín could try the back pockets of his pants.

Efraín paused. "You heard only two shots?"

"That's what I said."

"Look here." Efraín pushed the man onto his front.

There was another hole in his back.

"A third man could have been here and fired at the same instant as one of the other men so it sounded like only two shots," Efraín said.

"No. Both shots were equally loud."

Efraín would never question Catalino's perception of a sound. He looked at the gun. It was dark and chunky with a heavy, wide barrel, very different from his own old rifle. "Do you suppose the bullet went *through* him?"

"It must have."

Now they had to figure out who had shot first. Was the wounded man in Catalino's home the villain or an innocent victim?

"Would this one have died right away?" Efraín asked.

Catalino studied the location of the wound. "A tapir that was shot like that would have lasted a couple of minutes," he said.

"When they saw the Hill of the Source of Wealth, one must have shot the other so he'd have the treasure all to himself, and the other shot back," Efraín concluded.

"They hadn't used the shovel yet," Catalino pointed out. "If one meant to steal the treasure from the other, why not wait till they had dug it up? With two people working, it would go much faster." He took the shovel from Efraín and dug, shaking his head at the inexplicable behavior of foreigners.

Efraín picked up a twig and poked gently at the hole in the man's back. He turned him over and looked at the chest wound. He observed the way the cloth of the shirt was sucked into the wound in back but just stuck raggedly onto the blood of the larger front wound.

Catalino stopped digging and watched. Their question had been answered. This man had been shot from behind.

The guilty man had lived while the innocent died.

"Orange-hair shot Brown-hair in the back when they found the hill," Efraín concluded. "Brown-hair must have managed to turn and shoot Orange-hair before he died."

They went ahead and buried him. At the last minute Efraín threw the guns in, too. These were a style he'd never handled, with a clip instead of loose bullets, and Efraín had no idea how to get new ammunition for them.

Catalino cut a sapling to use as a lever. With it they worked the rotten log over to cover the grave. As they rolled it, a terrified armadillo exploded from the hollow end of the log and scurried off, its armor crashing through the leaves like thunder. It blundered into an old stump, bounced off, and vanished on the hillside.

"There's always a witness," Catalino said. He tossed the knapsack over his shoulder and they left the valley.

As predicted, the wounded man was conscious when they returned. Sulema had mashed some of the beans and mixed them with bean broth. She was giving him sips from a gourd bowl.

The orange-haired man managed a smile and spoke to them in slow but clear Spanish. "You three saved my life. Thank you."

Catalino wouldn't look at him.

"What else could we do?" Efraín finally said. "How do you feel?"

"It hurts a lot, but the bleeding's stopped." The stranger noticed the knapsack as Catalino set it down. The smile left his face.

"Is—did you find—"

Catalino spoke. "The other man is dead. You sleep now. Sulema, come outside and let him rest." Surprised, Sulema balanced the bowl on a woven holder and followed them out to the edge of the clearing.

"Did he say what happened?" Efraín asked her.

"No. I didn't ask him."

In a low voice Efraín told her what they'd found.

The stranger had turned his head to watch them through the doorway. When they came back in, his eyes were on the papers still drying on the rock. "I see you've read those papers," he said. "You know what my friend—" he stumbled a little over the word "—and I were after. I'd better explain.

"It all started last year. I was traveling around Central America, very low budget. One night I stayed in an old half-ruined building in Guatemala. A couple of families were living in the part that still had a roof, and I paid them a dollar to let me sleep there, too.

"Apparently the place had been a short-lived Spanish mission. In the morning I noticed a wooden chest in the room. I asked what was in it. They said only worthless things. I looked. It held old books and papers. They were mission records: names of converts, lists of har-

vests, complaints of things they didn't have and couldn't get. Paper was one of the supplies they sometimes had trouble with—there would be periods when all the records for that time were written on the backs of scrap paper. I realized one was a letter meant for the king of Spain. I could hardly believe it. Somehow it had reached the mission but was never sent on. Who knows what happened to interrupt its journey . . . an uprising, a ship that never came. The fathers must have read it over the years but either didn't believe it—treasure tales were rampant—or simply couldn't pursue it. Travel was even harder then than now."

The man grimaced with pain and paused. He took a long slow breath and went on.

"When I returned to the States, I was afraid to ask an expert to help me read the letter. I did tell one friend—Blaine—the man you found. We'd had our share of problems in the past, but I was broke and he always had money. He agreed to finance our expedition, and we'd split the treasure. We flew to the big port nearest here and bought a launch. We bought guns, too—he was afraid of bandits. We went along the coast, and yesterday afternoon, just before dark, we saw the rock like a shark's tooth. We landed, pulled the boat onto the shore, and camped. Insects bit us, and strange jungle sounds kept us awake. We didn't sleep at all. At dawn we got up. Our food was soggy; seawater had splashed it on the boat trip. We set off towards the sunrise.

"When we saw the hill, we stopped to discuss how best to locate the treasure. An odd mist covered the ground. Somehow we got into a stupid, silly argument. We brought up things from the past and threw them at each other like rocks. It got out of hand. Finally he yanked out his gun and pointed it at me. I said he was too much of a coward to shoot . . . he fired. I don't know if he meant to.

"I managed to pull out my gun as I fell. When I hit the ground, I couldn't see because of the fog. I thought I was blind. A great rushing noise filled my head. The sound receded. I knew I was losing consciousness. Blaine screamed. He must have sensed I was going to shoot because the fog would have kept him from seeing my gun. I fired—I was afraid he'd shoot me again. That's all I remember. I didn't know I'd hit him till you told me." The stranger stopped talking. He closed his eyes.

Efraín and Catalino and Sulema went back outside.

"Don't you believe me?" the man yelled hoarsely.

"How can his story be true?" Sulema asked. "He says his friend was facing him. You both say the friend had his back turned."

Catalino poked sadly at the dying coals.

Efraín sat down on a rock. He thought of the two papers, meaning-

less squiggles to him and to Catalino but chock-full of information for Sulema because she knew how to read the writing of humans.

There were many kinds of writing in the world. Most people could read one or two kinds but not others.

Catalino knew how to read a language behind words. When Sulema had read to them about the treasure, the words had meant something to the old man but not to Efraín or Sulema.

He, Efraín, knew how to read another kind of writing—the language of the rain forest. He had neglected to do so today.

“Wait here,” he said.

He hurried back to the valley, almost running, which he hardly ever did because of the heat.

He stood among the balsamo trees and set his mind to reading the phrases written there.

The disturbed leaves where the men had fallen he'd already seen, as well as the drag mark where he'd pulled the wounded man to Catalino's. He observed round scuffs and pits of fresh dirt where the armadillo had scratched. They dotted the area where the two men had been. He squatted at the place where the orange-haired man had lain. The ground was flat except for one concave place the size of a watermelon. Probably a small tree had grown there years before, toppled, decomposed, and left only the depression where its rootball had been.

Efraín removed loose leaves that had slipped into the cavity when he had moved the wounded man. On the floor of the cavity mashed leaves were pressed against the soil.

He studied the log where it rested on the stranger's grave. At one end its heart had rotted away, leaving the niche that the armadillo had leaped from. It was shallow, certainly not the creature's regular burrow—more like a temporary refuge. He looked up the slope and spotted a hole. The entryway was an arch polished smooth by the armadillo's shell.

How had the dead man lain? Efraín closed his eyes and reviewed the scene in his mind: on his back, head toward his wounded friend, feet at the hollow end of the log.

Efraín opened his eyes and checked the valley for anything he'd missed.

He saw grey hair caught on the bark of a tree where a coatimundi had rubbed an itch.

He observed a termite nest that an anteater had ripped open.

He heard the groan of two dead trees rubbing high overhead, neither allowing the other to fall.

He noticed fragments of fruit peel left from an agouti's breakfast.

He saw where a monkey troop had thrown down twigs and air plants to clear a highway through the treetops.

He smelled the acrid scent of a wildcat that had marked its territory in the night.

But he didn't observe anything else pertinent to the shootings.

Mystery solved, Efraín returned to Catalino's.

Sulema, with the baby smiling on her lap, sat by the bean pot. The baby grasped one end of a twig while Catalino tugged with two fingers on the other end. They looked up as he approached.

"It's all right," Efraín reassured them. "He's telling the truth."

The wounded man heard from inside the hut. "Of course I'm telling the truth," he called. "Why didn't you believe me when I first told you?"

They went inside. "Because you shot your friend in the back," Efraín said.

The stranger's pale face blanched even more. "That's impossible! He was facing me when he fired. Why would he have turned his back an instant later?"

"You said he screamed after he shot you but before you shot him?"

"That's right."

"You heard a loud rushing noise when you fell?"

"Yes, in my head."

"This rushing noise started suddenly, and then your friend screamed."

"Yes."

"The low fog hid the ground while all this was happening?"


"Right, but what does any of this matter?"

Efraín hitched up his pants. "An armadillo was foraging in the valley when you and your friend arrived," he explained. "It had scratched little holes in the soil, looking for insects. Hearing you, it crouched down in a hollow in the earth just big enough for its shell and hoped you'd go away soon. That indentation was right where you stopped. You and your friend—Blaine?"

"Yes, Blaine."

"You and Blaine argued. The armadillo remained still. Blaine shot you, and you fell on the armadillo's hiding place. The armadillo panicked. Your body was between it and its burrow on the hillside. It fled towards the next closest refuge it knew, the end of the log where Blaine stood. Those creatures are fast, and they make a lot of noise running through leaves and brush. Your friend didn't know what was charging at him. Because of the fog he couldn't see it was only an armadillo. Maybe he thought it was your dying soul bent on revenge. He screamed and whirled to run.

"Heading for safety in the log, the armadillo crashed into Blaine's legs—armadillos can't see well, you know—and knocked his feet out from under him. Your bullet, fired blind as you lay under the blanket



of mist, hit Blaine as he fell backwards. That's what happened." Efraín, unused to talking so much, took a big drink from Catalino's water gourd.

The stranger stared open-mouthed. "How do you know this?"

"I read it." Efraín smiled.

Sulema helped Catalino prepare a tea for the man's pain. "Like aspirin," she explained to the stranger as she helped him drink.

"I didn't take the bullet out," Catalino told him. "I was afraid I'd hurt you worse. Maybe it can stay there, or maybe you'll want a doctor in your land to remove it."

"You're not a sawbones of the Old West, are you?" the stranger asked, grinning feebly.

Catalino looked blank. "I suppose we're west of something," he said. "You'll be able to walk in a week, maybe less. I'll take you back to your boat and help you launch it then."

"I get the hint," the orange-haired man said. "You don't want me sneaking around your forest and disturbing your peace. That's okay. I'm through with treasure hunting. It's too expensive, and I'm not talking about money."

"Ah, the treasure." Catalino gazed into space. He went to a thin slab of wood which he'd strapped with bark twine to the cane wall, making a shelf. On this shelf were his spoon, a tin cup, salt, coffee, sugar, and a small glass jar. He opened the jar and dipped a splinter of wood into the thick dark syrup inside.

"I really shouldn't do this," he said. "This is for when I go to visit my people." He struck a match and touched it to the splinter.

A rich scent filled the hut.

"The balsamo trees give us incense . . . to us it has always been valuable. They have always provided us with this substance, and they always will—through all the cycles of time."

They breathed the fragrance until it cloyed in their nostrils.

"Those same balsamos couldn't have been alive when that letter was written," the stranger said.

"From the way they're scattered across the valley, I expect they're the children of a giant tree that stood on the hilltop for centuries. That tree died and rotted away but left its offspring in the valley," Catalino said. "When these trees die, many human generations from now, *their* children will remain."

The stranger sighed. "The Hill of the Source of Wealth," he said. "I came across references to incense in books at the library when I was doing research, planning this expedition. Now I remember that it was mentioned as an important item of tribute from the native people to their royalty. I was just so sure the treasure was gold and jewels that I never even considered it could be something else. The man who

wrote that letter hundreds of years ago assumed it was, too. He died for a treasure he didn't even want."

"Like your friend," Catalino said.

The stranger turned his face to the wall. "It was all so *stupid*. We were just tired and hungry. . . ." He sounded like he was choking.

They left him to his misery and went into the late afternoon sun.

The beans were about to burn. Catalino grabbed a stick and stirred them. "Do you want to eat before you go?" he asked Efraín and Sulema.

"No, thanks. We'd better get home before dark. We'll eat there. Our beans will still be warm."

Efraín helped Sulema settle the baby across her back. They hurried through the dusk, watching the dark trail closely for fer-de-lance. Efraín was relieved to see a patch of light ahead—the clearing around their house.

The bean pot lay overturned by the dead coals. The soil was moist where liquid had soaked into the ground. Not a bean was in sight.

The hog had flopped in the doorway. Its belly swelled against the posts. It shrieked in fright, thrashed in an effort to back out, then realized who they were. Its alarm cries turned to delighted grunts of welcome.

Efraín examined the pig. It was unmarked and unharmed.

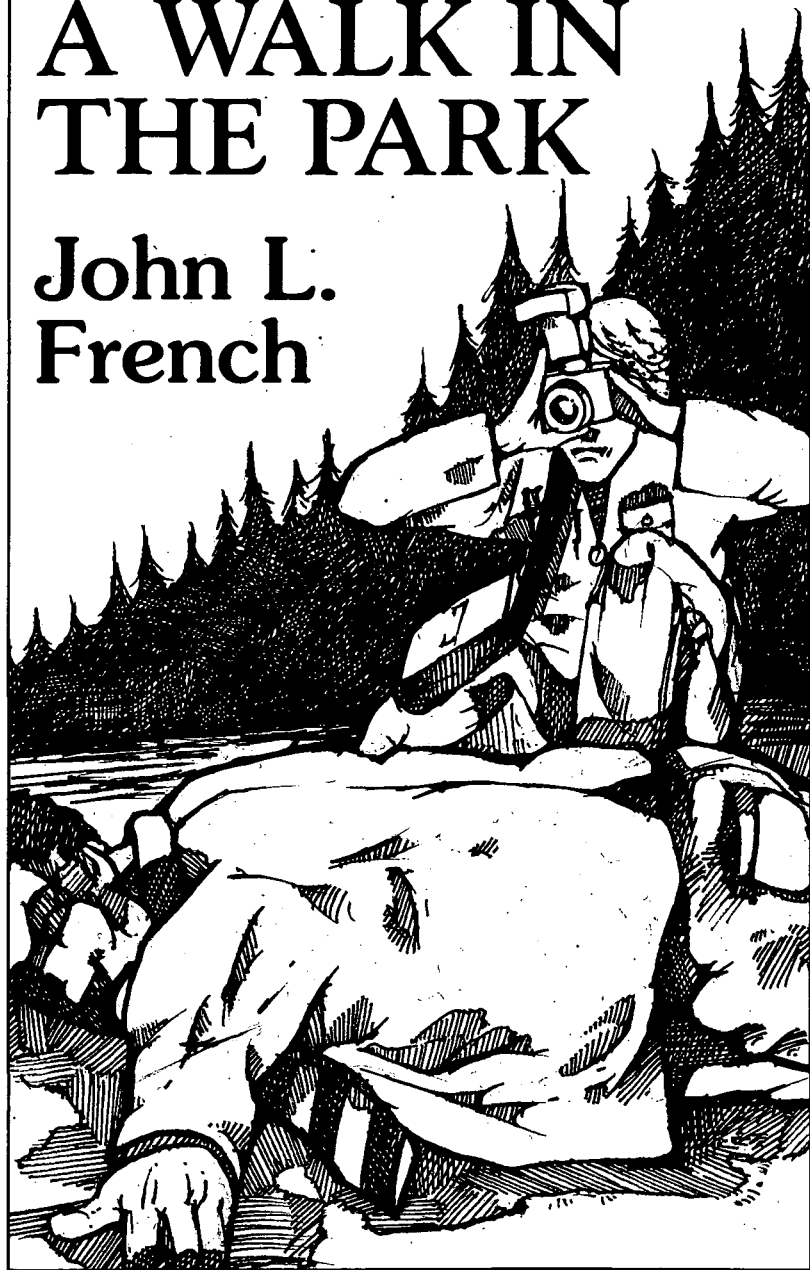
A sack of ground corn had stayed safe in the house, beyond the pig's reach. Sulema renewed the fire and made thick, chewy tortillas. "Half a dinner is better than none," she said. "When I was in the city, I saw people with so many different kinds of food on their plates that I don't know how they could remember what they were eating."

Efraín lay awake for a long time that night. He understood fear, mistrust, and greed. He could follow the chain of errors and bad luck that had led to the shootings. That was all to be lamented but was comprehensible.

What kept Efraín from sleep was a mystery he couldn't solve. Where had the pig been last night?

A WALK IN THE PARK

John L.
French



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**H**ilton Parkway is a snake of a road. Connecting North Avenue with Edmondson Avenue in southwest Baltimore, it has more twists and turns than a well-paced thriller. Even good drivers on clear, dry days slow down when driving it out of respect for its treachery.

Susan Lancione was not a good driver. Neither was she a sober one. And it was not a clear dry day. It was instead a cold, wet Friday night in January.

Susan turned off Edmondson onto Hilton Parkway just after midnight. Driving north, she negotiated the first turn with no problem, but the alcohol in her system made her oversteer during the second. She missed the third altogether. That sent her off the road, down a hill, and into the trees of Gwynn Falls Park.

When she woke up, Susan found that her car had wedged itself between two trees, making it impossible to open the doors. She could roll the windows down, but the same trees kept her from climbing out. The back windows opened only from the side, to provide ventilation. They were too small for her to crawl through anyway. Unable to leave the car, she did the only thing she could. She went back to sleep.

Officer Kevin Miller was on routine patrol when he noticed the broken guardrail. Looking past it into the trees, he could see the red glow from Susan's tail-lights. He pulled onto the shoulder, radioed for help, put on his flashers and bar lights, and said

a quick prayer that the driver was not too badly hurt. Then he grabbed his high-powered flashlight and without much thought to his pride, clothing, or possible broken bones he descended the slippery hill and followed the muddy tracks to Susan's car.

Falling only twice, Miller finally got there. He soon determined that, except for some bruises, Ms. Lancione was uninjured and that there was nothing he could do for her. He again used his radio, this time to request the appropriate emergency equipment.

By three in the morning everyone thought it was almost over. The crew from CP 11, the police department's emergency unit, had set up generator-powered lights and had strung a rope between the road and the trees to assist those going up and down and to keep them from getting as muddy as Officer Miller. The fire department's emergency team had nearly finished cutting Susan out of her car, and the paramedics were standing by to treat her once she was free. That was when the cold, the rain, and the three cups of coffee he had drunk that night got to Officer Miller. Without drawing attention to himself he took a long walk into the trees. He returned by a different path, and that was when he tripped over the body.

**I** wasn't in a good mood when I arrived on the scene. I work for the Baltimore police department as a crime scene technician. It's my job to docu-



ment the scene and search for and recover physical evidence. I enjoy my work, most of the time. Tonight was not one of those times. Processing the scene of a suspicious death at three thirty in the morning in the cold, the rain, and the mud is not my idea of fun. Swearing softly, I put on my best professional demeanor and got out of my van.

The first person I talked to was Detective Alexander Klein. Klein was sitting in an unmarked car just slightly ahead of the break in the guardrail. The engine was running, and he had the heater on. He looked warm and dry, and I hated him for that. Seeing me approach in his rear view mirror, he rolled down his window.

"Matthew Grace, how are you this fine morning?"

"Get out of that car and see how fine it is. You got this one, Alexander?"

"No, if I had this one, I'd be down in the muck. Arnold's got it. As senior man I elected to stay up here and coordinate things, staying available if he needs help."

"And if he needs help?"

"I'll use my radio and call for some, and wait right here until it arrives. This is a new suit, and unless that's the mayor down there with a knife in her back, I'm staying where it's warm and dry."

Klein did have the information I needed to get started—names, numbers, things like that. I went back to my van, put what equipment I would need in a back-

pack, and very carefully made my way down the hill, disappointing everyone watching me by not falling or getting anything muddy but my shoes. Seeing Detective Rich Arnold, I gave him the usual greeting. "Hi, Agatha, how's it going?"

At that time Rich Arnold was one of the newest of the detectives assigned to Homicide. A few months before, he'd been instrumental in solving Baltimore's only homicide in which the victim left a "dying clue." Someone (he rightly suspects me) hung the nickname "Agatha Christie" on him, and it stuck. He's not sure how to take it. On the one hand it does remind everyone of his accomplishment. On the other, very few men like being called Agatha.

As usual, he ignored my greeting and filled me in on everything that had happened, from Ms. Lancione's accident up to Officer Miller's unexpected find.

"Really, Grace, there's not a lot that needs to be done. The body's been there awhile, there's some decomposition, and the animals have been at it. If there were any shoe prints, the rain has washed them away. I'll just need photos and a sketch of the scene. Recover anything that looks like it might be evidence, but don't go too far afield. It may not be a homicide. Can't tell with the shape the body's in. I'll have a man posted just in case. If the autopsy comes back murder, I'll have the academy class come down and do a line search of the

area. With luck, it's just some homeless guy dead of exposure."

Lucky for us, one less case to close. Not so lucky, I thought, for the poor guy whose body was going to the medical examiner's office on Penn Street. Either way, I had the same amount of work to do, and the sooner I did it, the sooner I would be home.

The victim had been a big man, weighing at least three hundred pounds. He was lying facedown in the mud, his arms spread as if he had tried to break his fall. From what I could see, none of his pockets had been turned out, so if it was a murder, robbery might not have been the motive.

I started by photographing the body from several angles. I always do this first; that way the detective or the medical examiner's crew are free to examine the body, since its original position and condition have been recorded. I then backed up and photographed the body in relation to its surroundings—in this case a clearing and a lot of trees, the generator-powered lights casting odd shadows as I walked my circle around the victim.

Not wanting to be caught on film, Arnold and the officers stayed back while I took my pictures. By the time I was finished, they had been joined by the crew from the medical examiner's office. As one of the M.E.'s people took some Polaroid photos for their own records, the other got ready to do her preliminary examination of the body. She put on disposable coveralls, a mask,

eye shields, and rubber gloves. Starting from the top, she carefully felt her way around the scalp. She stopped when she got to the back of the neck.

"There's a hole here, just above the hairline. From the size I'd say about nine millimeters' worth."

"Damn! You sure, Sheila?"

"When you see as many bodies as I do in this city, you get to know what a wound from a nine looks like."

Arnold was none too happy about that. Now he would have to wake up early and go to the autopsy, as well as spend more time on the scene, wet and dark as it was, than he had planned.

We waited while Sheila finished her once-over of the body. She checked the back pockets. Nothing there. I stopped her before she and her partner could flip our victim over onto the collapsible cart. "Rich, before things get moved too much more, aren't you forgetting something?"

"What now, Grace?"

"If that's a 9mm hole, there's a 9mm casing somewhere about."

"Unless they shot him somewhere else and dumped him here."

"Look at him. He's three hundred if he's a pound and over six and a half feet long. Would you carry him if you didn't have to?"

"Sheila, what does the wound look like?" Arnold asked.

"It's a good thing I've got this mask on, detective, or I'd have to charge you extra. This sucker's a couple of days gone and getting really ripe."



Sheila borrowed a high-beam flash from an officer and got up close and personal with the victim. "From what I can see, powder burns around the hole. Close contact wound. You find the gun, there'll be bits of him inside the barrel."

I looked at Arnold. He nodded agreement.

"Okay," he said, "somebody could've marched him out here. It would be easier than carrying him. You want a metal detector or are you going to go down on your hands and knees to look for the brass?"

"Just a minute." It's not often I get to play Sherlock Holmes, but this looked like a good time to try. Most semi-automatic weapons eject their shell casings to the back and to the right. Taking the bright light from Sheila, I stood at the feet of the body where the victim should have been standing when he was shot. Turning to my right I swept the high beam back and forth over the ground, working my way backwards. I was rewarded with a glint of rain-washed metal a few feet away. Arnold walked over to the spot while I kept it highlighted with the flash.

"Lucky, Grace, lucky."

"Rather be lucky than good, Rich. Stay there, will you, while I get my camera and an evidence envelope."

Sheila and her partner finished with the victim about the time I finished with what I had to do in that area. I started my crime-scene diagram near the

body and worked outward so that when it was time to help carry the body up the muddy hill I was at the far end of the operation. I got to watch as Arnold was pressed into service. It's a good thing he wasn't wearing his new suit.

It was well into Saturday morning by the time I finished my reports and submitted what little evidence I'd recovered from the scene. There was not a lot in that submission to help Arnold solve this one. A gun would have to be found to match against the cartridge case, and the soil and vegetation samples would likewise wait until a suspect was developed. Then we could compare them with similar samples recovered from his clothing, house, and car. I called Arnold and left him with that cheery thought before going home.

I was off duty for what was left of the weekend. On Sunday we changed shifts, so instead of working from ten P.M. to six A.M., on Monday I reported at the more decent hour of two in the afternoon. As soon as I got in, I found a note to see Klein up in the homicide offices.

I found Klein at his desk. In a room normally occupied by eight or nine detectives, Klein was sitting alone reading reports.

"Where are Agatha and the Deacon?"

"I thought you promised to stop calling him that."

"Only to his face."

Not everyone in the department has a nickname. Klein does-



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n't have one, and neither do I. "The Deacon" is Sergeant Joshua Parker, Klein and Arnold's supervisor. He got the name because, besides being an elder in his church, he also has the reputation of being the most honest man in the BPD. He has never been known to tell a lie, to anyone, for any reason.

Few people call Parker "Deacon" to his face. I used to, but I stopped after the sergeant paid a visit to the director of the crime lab. As Director Thomas put it, "Fun's fun, Grace, but if he wants to eat, a man has to have a job."

"Rich and the sarge had to leave. I'm supposed to fill you in and then send you off to meet them."

"New evidence in the park murder?"

Klein nodded. "They found the victim's car."

"Where?"

"On Franklintown, where it cuts through the park." Klein opened the case folder on the desk in front of him.

"We've identified the body. The dead guy is, or was, Harry Winslow, reported missing by his wife last Wednesday."

"How did you I.D. him? From what I saw, the fingers were pretty much gone."

"They were. We had to rely on plain old fashioned police work."

"Such as?"

"We searched his pockets and found his driver's license. His wife made the I.D."

"Any suspects?"

"His wife, girlfriend if he's got

one, all the people he worked with, and half the lowlifes on the west side."

"Any real leads?"

"If so, Rich has them. It's his case, remember?"

"Alex, how is it that when you two pair up Rich always gets stuck with the whodunits and you get the ones with the killer standing over the body screaming a confession?"

"Experience, Matthew, experience. When Rich gets it, he'll know how to dump the hard ones on his partner, who by that time will be somebody else." Klein closed the case folder and stood up.

"You've got a car to dust. You'll find some prints, the computer will match them up, Rich will take the credit, and another case will be closed."

Monday's drive to the park was definitely pleasanter than Friday night's. This time I was driving out there at the start of my shift rather than near its end. The sun was shining, and the temperature was promising to break forty for the first time since New Year's Eve. It was a good day to spend outside.

The only two vehicles I saw as I pulled onto Franklintown were a marked patrol car and a very big Lincoln. That made sense. Our victim had been a big man, and big men need the room a big car gives them. I looked around for the unmarked car that the homicide squad usually drives. Unless they were parked behind a tree, they weren't on the scene.

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The Southwest officer guarding the car eased out of her cruiser when she saw me pull up. She came over to meet me, and we walked to the Lincoln together.

"Where's homicide?"

"The sergeant said they had more important things to do than wait for you. He told me to tell you just to take pictures. I'm supposed to call a tow truck and have it taken to headquarters. The sarge said you can dust and search it there."

"So what you're telling me is that instead of spending a nice sunny day in the park with you I get to go back to that dimly lit, poorly ventilated garage all by myself?" I gave her my best smile.

"Life's rough, isn't it?" She gave me what was probably her second- or third-best smile in return, and I got to thinking that maybe I'd have plans for after work.

"Did the good sergeant say anything else?"

"Only that you were to call homicide when you finished."

"And what about the other detective—he say anything?"

"Not much, just asked me out to dinner." I don't know which bothered me more. That Arnold had asked before I could, or that we had the same taste in women.

"And?"

"I told him I'd have to ask my husband and get back to him." She gave me her number one smile and went back to her cruiser to call a tow truck.

After photographing the car, I looked around, first inside the

car, then the surrounding area. No blood, no other cartridge cases, nothing to indicate a struggle. As it had been almost a week since Winslow had been killed, I wasn't really expecting to find anything. Still, I had to look; sometimes you get lucky.

What I did find were some footpaths from the road into the park. I followed the most likely one until it became clear that it led away from the clearing where Winslow was found. So did the second most likely. The third trail led me straight to the murder scene.

When Klein told me that the victim's car had been found on a road through the park, I'd hoped there would be some direct connection to the scene. Before leaving I had packed a video camera that had been seized from a drug dealer and now belonged to the laboratory division. I got the camera from my van and retraced my steps. I started recording with the Lincoln, showing where it was on Franklinton Road, then followed the first two trails until their direction away from the scene became apparent. I went down the third trail and kept the tape going until I came to the small clearing where Harry Winslow had been facedown in the mud.

I don't normally use a video camera at crime scenes. The images it captures are too fleeting. You can hold the camera on a body or a bloodstain for a minute or five minutes, but you still have to move away, and the image you



want to leave with the jury is replaced by something less impressive, less threatening. A videotape shown in court is too much like television, and I'd sooner not be associated with TV crime shows, where all too often the first one arrested is not the guilty party.

A photograph stays with you. Hold a picture of a murder victim in your hand. Look away. Look back, and the victim is still there. A photograph can be enlarged and placed in the courtroom for all to see. It doesn't go away. In this video age of quick cuts and sound bites, a still picture of a crime is something special.

Yet video has its uses. And today it was the best way to visually link the location of the car with the crime scene.

I left the scene when the tow truck arrived. An hour later I was in HQ garage still waiting for it to bring in the Lincoln. A half hour later the Lincoln finally showed up and was parked next to the other cars that had been towed in that day. Two had been stolen in carjackings. They would wait until the next shift started and could spare the people to do them. Another car belonged to a suspect involved in a rape. That had come in the day before, and we were still waiting for the detective to get the warrant signed so we could start on that. Another car or two and we'd be full up and have to put the overflow in the spaces reserved for the command staff.

With half the day wasted al-

ready, I got right to work on the Lincoln.

Searching a car for evidence is no different from processing any other crime scene except that everything comes to you in one nice neat package. You just have to open it up and take out what you need. I had already photographed the car in the park, but I took a few more shots of the interior and exterior to show that the car towed into the garage was the same one that had been found in the park.

The Lincoln was clean. Mr. Winslow had kept his car neater than most people do their houses. Nothing on the floor but the mats, no trash in the back seat, the ashtrays had never been used. And of course in another, more thorough search for blood, cartridge cases, and possible weapons I struck out completely.

I removed the floormats and packaged them for submission to the Trace Evidence Unit. The criminalist who received the mats would examine them for hairs and fibers that the person who had left the car in the park may have left behind.

For the same reason, I vacuumed the inside of the car, trying to pick up hairs and fibers that might have missed the mat. I made a note to remind Arnold to get comparison samples from Winslow's body.

After everything had been collected, I was then free to dust the car for prints without worrying about the fingerprint powder's contaminating any evidence.



Normally, with a car the size of the Lincoln I would expect to recover twenty to thirty fingerprint lifts. This time, with the rain having washed off the outside and Winslow's apparent cleaning fetish taking care of the inside, I finished in about forty-five minutes and came away with fewer than ten lifts. Most of them came from the driver's area—the inside of the driver's side door, the seatbelt buckle, and the rear view mirror. Most would probably be Winslow's.

I went back to the lab office, finished my paperwork, and called Arnold to let him know what I'd found—or rather hadn't found—in the car. Sergeant Parker answered the phone.

"Sorry about missing you in the park," I told him.

"Technician Grace, I'm sure that you did not need either me or Detective Arnold to tell you how to do your job." Ever since his talk with the lab's director about the "Deacon" business, the sergeant and I have maintained a professional courtesy toward each other. We'll never be friends, but at least we work together better than we used to. There's probably a lesson in that for me.

"Did you find anything that I should pass on to Detective Arnold?"

"Just the usual, prints and evidence for Trace if and when he comes up with a suspect."

"Very good. I'll expect you at the case review tomorrow, one o'clock, bring whatever you have."

"Yes, sir. And could you ask

Detective Arnold to have someone from the family pick the car up as soon as possible? We really need the space."

Someone from the lab has this conversation with a homicide detective almost every week. Parker still managed to sound shocked. "Technician Grace, do you honestly expect the widow to interrupt her grieving to pick up a car?"

I almost said yes but realized it wouldn't help matters any.

"I don't suppose we could have it towed to the City Yard?"

"No, Technician Grace, we cannot. I will inform Mrs. Winslow that the car will be held until she is ready to pick it up, at her convenience, not ours. I will see you tomorrow."

"At her convenience, not ours." That was easy for him to say. He wasn't the one who had to explain to a major why a stolen BMW was parked in his reserved space. But then again, neither was I. The major would call Director Thomas, and it would be the director who had to do the explaining.

With that happy thought I went home.

The case review started, as do all of Sergeant Parker's meetings, exactly on time. There were five of us around the table in the meeting room—myself, Klein and Arnold, Officer Miller, and Detective Janet Wingate, a new addition to the homicide squad. We'd all been early and were sitting around talking about nothing in particular. At one o'clock

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Parker walked in, sat down, and without preamble said, "Tell me about the crime scene."

Klein and Arnold both looked at me. I passed the ball to Miller, who related how too much coffee had led to the discovery of the body. I then gave Parker, Klein, and Wingate a description of the scene itself, passing around copies of the crime-scene photographs and my sketch as I did so. When I finished, I gave Arnold a copy of the videotape linking Winslow's car to the scene.

"So," Parker said, shifting his gaze from me to Arnold, "that's what it looked like. What happened down there?"

Arnold cleared his throat. He fumbled with his papers and cleared his throat again. He had been in homicide for almost a year now. By Klein's standards and mine, that still made him a new guy, but one would think he'd be used to presenting cases in the review. He wasn't like that in court. I think Parker scared him.

"Well, sir, it looks as if—that is, what probably happened was that Winslow and at least one other person parked the Lincoln on Franklinton Road, walked down the path to the clearing, and someone shot him in the back of the head at close range with a 9mm."

I had heard better presentations. So had Parker. So had Wingate, and she'd just started.

"Detective Arnold, did it occur to you that, since Mr. Winslow's car was still there but the shoot-

er was not, he might have met his killer there? The clearing in which he was found was a perfect meeting spot for those engaged in illicit activities." Arnold mumbled something about just getting to that consideration, but Parker talked over him. "As for what you've said, I figured that out from Technician Grace's excellent photographs. What I had hoped you would tell me was who this person or persons were and why they put a bullet in Harry Winslow's head."

"Well, sergeant, we're still working on that. Maybe Grace has something."

"We'll get back to Technician Grace shortly. Give me what you do have on Mr. Winslow."

Klein stepped in for his partner. "Harry Winslow was an entrepreneur. Back in the seventies he had several Circus Burger franchises. When that chain folded its tents and went back to California, he took over the Leon's Lake Trout stores. Since then he's run record stores, pizza joints, and, briefly, tanning parlors. He got in on the video rental business just before it got hot and started Fun Flicks Video. He had six of these stores going and was planning to open two more when he died.

"Winslow was not a stranger to trouble. He'd been shot once in a holdup of a Circus Burger store. He lost the tanning parlors when a customer got stuck in a tanning booth and it took two hours to get her out. She sued, and he had to sell the business to pay off the



judgment. And he's been arrested once or twice."

"Three times, actually."

Everyone looked at Wingate.

"What?" Wingate asked. "The new guy isn't supposed to talk?"

"Not at all, Detective Wingate. Please tell us how you know the deceased."

"Thank you, sergeant." She was poised and in control, not at all like the rookie detective she was supposed to be. She took a moment to decide what she wanted to say and then went on. "As some of you know, I worked for two years in the Youth Division before coming here. The name Harry Winslow seemed familiar, so I checked our back cases. Just about the time I transferred to Youth, Winslow was arrested for a fourth-degree sex offense."

"Meaning?"

"He copped a feel from a sixteen-year-old who worked at one of his video stores."

So Harry Winslow liked young girls. I looked over as an "ahh!" escaped Arnold. He was thinking that Wingate had handed him the start of another possible motive.

"What happened with the case?"

"It never went to trial, Detective Klein."

"Make it Alex. Why not?"

"The girl's family settled for an undisclosed sum, and the charges were dropped."

"And the other two arrests, were they on moral grounds?"

Wingate deferred to Klein. "In a way, sergeant. Last year the

Feds nailed Winslow for bootlegging tapes from his stores. They popped him again two weeks later doing the same thing. He had a connection that let him provide videos of current movies within a week of their release."

"And what was the status of those charges?"

"Before they were abated by death, Winslow's attorney had run out of ways to stall and had just entered the bargaining phase."

"So it's possible that whoever killed Winslow did it so his name wouldn't come up in the negotiations."

"That's possible, but he hadn't given the Feds any names yet, and there are too many outfits running pirate copies for them to make a guess."

Parker stood up. "Gentlemen, and lady, we have a man who for many years has maintained a chain of stores of one type or the other. Most of these stores had a lot of traffic, a variety of customers, and a rapid turnover of cash, product, and employees. In taking care of these stores, Mr. Winslow didn't have to be anywhere in particular at any given time. He would therefore have a logical reason for not being able to account for his whereabouts if asked."

"Now then, this is Baltimore. Take the above and consider that this man is now dead from a 9mm bullet and what does that suggest?"

Without missing a beat, all of us chorused, "Drugs!"



"You have three possible motives: sex, drugs, and some video pirates. That should be enough to keep you busy. Technician Grace, anything from the lab that can help?"

"Nothing back on the prints yet. As for the rest, give us something to compare my samples to, and you might get a match."

"Very well, Detectives Klein and Arnold, you have by now talked to the employees of his video stores. What have you learned?"

"Not much, sergeant." Arnold was now on familiar ground and sounded more confident. "Winslow dealt only with the managers or assistant managers of the stores. He didn't have much to do with the individual employees."

Janet Wingate raised her hand to interrupt. At Parker's nod she said, "That would be because of the court settlement. In return for dropping the charges, part of the deal was that Winslow had no dealings with any of the store employees, especially the pretty, young girls."

"Anyway," Arnold continued, "while everyone mentioned that Winslow had an eye for the ladies, and one or two reported seeing him accompanied by different women on occasion, no one reported anything or anyone specific."

"I suppose that not having to account for your daily activities would make adultery easier. Detective Wingate."

"Yes, sergeant."

"Go back to the stores, talk to

the women who work there. They may be more willing to tell you something than a male detective. How about the wife, anything there?"

"It doesn't look like it, sarge. Rich and I talked to her a couple of times. She seemed like your typical grieving widow."

"Was she aware of her husband's affairs, business or otherwise?"

"She may have been. We asked her if Winslow was having trouble at work, and she just sort of shook her head and said he didn't tell her much about what went on. If she's like most wives, she knew more about what he was doing than he realized or she'll admit even to herself."

"Work on the pirate angle with the Federal agents, and get with narcotics and see if they can link Mr. Winslow to any drug activity. Talk to the wife again."

"Is there anything else?" Parker watched us all shake our heads. "In that case, you can all go." As we got up to leave, he stopped us.

"One last thing. I got a memo today from our captain. He had to park on the roof because there was a VW van in his parking space. It seems that the crime lab put it there because all their processing spaces were full. He has ordered us to have all cars the lab has finished with removed as soon as possible. Technician Grace?"

I was trying very hard not to smile. Klein was not helping. He had gotten behind Parker and was making faces.



"Yes, sergeant."

"First of all, stop smirking. Mrs. Winslow will call your office as to when she will be here to pick up her husband's car. Have someone give Detectives Klein or Arnold a call, and they will come down to sign it over to her."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

By luck I was in the office when Mrs. Winslow called. After the meeting I had advised the dispatcher that I was available for calls. Four burglary scenes later I was back in the office trying to eat my lunch while writing my reports. I'd just finished a sandwich and my third report when her phone call came. Since it had been my case to start with, I talked to her. She would take a cab and meet me at the garage entrance at headquarters in twenty minutes. I called the homicide office and caught Klein just as he was leaving for the night.

"Alex, Matthew here."

"What is it, and why do I think I should take my coat off?"

"I just got off the phone with Mrs. Winslow. She'll be here in twenty."

"And you need one of us to sign over the car. I knew I shouldn't have let Rich go early."

"Just ask one of the others to do it."

"Can't. You know the good sergeant. 'It's your case, detective, it's your responsibility.'" Klein actually did a very good impression of Sergeant Parker. One of these days Parker is going to catch him doing it, and Klein will be the new Morgue Liaison Offi-

cer and spend the rest of his days fingerprinting dead people.

Twenty minutes later the guard at the Frederick Street security booth called to tell me that Mrs. Winslow had arrived. I went down to escort her to her car.

The headquarters building has two entrances. The public entrance is on Fayette Street, but since it was after hours, Mrs. Winslow had to enter through the garage entrance on Frederick Street. I met her at the security booth, introduced myself, had her sign in, and walked her to her car.

It's a long walk up the four ramps that lead to the processing area. I'm never comfortable walking people up them to get their cars. These are people I've never met and will probably never see again, but I feel like I have to make some effort at conversation. You'd think we'd be able to bring them inside the building and take the elevator to the correct level. You would think that, but the rules say otherwise. According to Security, if someone is there to pick up his car, his business is in the garage, not the building. So instead we hug the walls, always watchful in case a speeding patrol car comes our way.

About halfway up the first ramp I finally said to Mrs. Winslow, "Sorry about your loss, ma'am." I knew from the reports that she was not that much older than me, late thirties to my mid-twenties, but she looked ten years past that difference. So

much that the "ma'am" came naturally and not as the result of police courtesy.

She was a small woman, five two or three and weighing no more than a third of the three hundred four pounds her husband had registered at the M.E.'s. She dressed like your oldest aunt, the one who went into business instead of raising a family, and had that air of resignation some women seem to be born with.

She didn't answer at first. I thought she either didn't hear me, or just didn't want to talk. We were halfway up the second ramp when she said in a surprisingly firm voice, "It had to happen, it did."

I made some kind of noncommittal grunt to show I was listening. I supposed this was her chance to unburden herself, to talk to someone who already knew most of the details. It's part of the job sometimes. I hoped she wouldn't start crying. I'm at a loss when people cry and always make matters worse trying to get them to stop.

"It had to happen," she repeated. "I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner. The movie people, the other things, he just couldn't deal with it. The women he could deal with, but they always cost money, too."

We'd been walking side by side, and my face must have shown surprise when she mentioned the women.

"Oh yes, I knew about the women. I didn't mind. You've seen him

and you see me. Believe me, I really didn't mind when he started to look elsewhere. It was actually quite a relief, quite a load off, actually."

I didn't know if that last had been an odd choice of words or her attempt at humor. I gave her a half smile that I hoped would serve in either case.

"Mrs. Winslow, if you know something about your husband's business or—" I paused for the right word. I'd almost said "other affairs."

"—or if you know about his other activities, the detectives would want to know."

"They asked. I didn't feel comfortable talking to those two. It's different talking to you. You're not a policeman, are you?" I shook my head. "You're just listening, not asking a lot of questions."

So, I decided, I would listen more and talk to Klein later.

I didn't get the chance. As we turned the corner to the last ramp, we saw Klein by the processing area. Mrs. Winslow stopped talking.

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. Winslow," Klein said as we approached. He got a slight nod as an answer.

Klein had an envelope with him. "I took your husband's keys out of property." He handed them to her.

"I have my own, thank you." She reached out for the clipboard Klein had in his other hand.

"Where do I sign?"

Klein pointed out the spaces on the release form for her name,



driver's license number, and signature. She filled in all the blanks and handed the board back to him.

"May I go now?"

"Well, I was hoping we could talk for a while. There are still some things that I'd like to go over with you."

"Later, maybe. I have other business I have to take care of today. Please call me sometime next week. I may be able to answer your questions then."

She turned to me. "Thank you for your kindness." Without another word to either of us she got in the Lincoln and drove off down the ramp.

"You made a good impression."

"It's my natural charm. I only wished it worked on women outside the job." I told him about our conversation on the ramp.

"It's a natural reaction. First, Rich and I bring her news about her husband's death. Then we have to ask questions about her possible involvement in that death. As part of the job, we suggest that she might have killed her husband, then ask if he did anything to anyone else that would get him killed. She has to deal with us while trying to mourn. Of course she resents us. Most of them do."

"But from what she told you, Rich and I will have to have another talk with her, at our convenience, not hers. She may know something that'll help."

As we walked from the garage into the second floor of the building Klein stopped and looked

back toward where the Lincoln had been parked. "Matthew, what did we just see?"

Not sure what he was talking about, I said, "We saw Mrs. Winslow get into a car and drive away."

"That's what I thought we saw."

We got in the elevator and rode up to our respective floors. I got off at the fifth, got my stuff together, and went home. Klein rode up to the sixth. Except for a two hour nap that he caught in an interview room, he worked through the night.

The telephone woke me up at eight o'clock. A groggy Alexander Klein greeted me when I answered it.

"Matthew, Alex."

"You sound terrible."

"I feel worse. Staying up all night will do that to you."

"I hope you're calling to brag."

"I wish I was. I've been at work all this time. I'll tell you about it when you get in. I'll meet you here at nine." He hung up before I could object.

There was never any question of my not going in. Klein wouldn't have called unless it was something really important, like the close of a case. I made it to headquarters with a few minutes to spare, wondering what his big break had been.

I talked the day-shift supervisor out of a lab van and loaded it up. Then I went up to homicide. Klein and Arnold were waiting.

"Morning, Rich. Alex, you look better than you sounded an hour ago."

“The close of a case and three cups of cop coffee does wonders.” He started putting on his coat. “Ready?” He waved a piece of paper in his hand.

“Where are we going, and how did you get a warrant signed this early?”

“Matthew, do you know how few judges are willing to answer the phone at two in the morning? And only one would let me come over to get this signed.”

“Devereux?”

“Who else?”

Judge Gertrude Devereux was every cop’s friend. In the courtroom she made life miserable for the prosecution, defense, and anyone else who came in unprepared. She was scrupulously fair to both sides and ruled as much for one side as the other. Still, when a guilty verdict came down on somebody who really deserved it, that somebody went to jail for as long as legally possible. She also believed that it was part of her job to be available to officers and detectives when they needed her to be, and not on an eight-to-four basis. She would not sign just anything put in front of her, but she listened, and if you had good probable cause, you could call her as Alex had done, any time day or night. Of course, if your reasons for wanting a warrant were too shaky, or just plain nonexistent, you got a chewing out that you’d remember three years after retirement. Then you got fined the equivalent of four hours’ overtime for “bothering up a judge for no

damn good reason.” Then you got the lesson in writing warrants that you should have received at the police academy.

Klein went ahead of us, rushing to the elevator. I walked with Arnold. “Where are we going?”

“He wouldn’t tell me either. Said it was a surprise. He’s driving, you’re supposed to follow.”

As Klein led the way, I tried to figure it out. I tuned my radio to the various district channels, hoping to hear a unit dispatched to meet homicide and the crime lab at a particular location. It was not until we turned from Northern Parkway onto Liberty Road that I began to catch on.

We were well into Baltimore County when we turned onto Buckingham Road. We pulled up in front of a house whose address I recognized from the police reports. It was where Harry Winslow had lived.

Two patrol cars from the Baltimore County Police were parked in the driveway, blocking in two other cars. The Lincoln I was familiar with. I supposed the other, a Dodge passenger van, belonged to Mrs. Winslow. Parked on the street was a tow truck, no doubt waiting to take the van to headquarters to be searched.

“What did I miss?” I asked Klein when we met in front of the house.

“I’ll tell you later; business first.” He moved to rap on the door, but Mrs. Winslow opened it before he could do so.

“May I help you gentlemen?”

“Doris Winslow, I have a war-



rant for your arrest for the murder of your husband, Harry Winslow. I also have a warrant to search your house, cars, and grounds for evidence related to that murder.” She stepped aside and let us in.

As it was really Arnold’s case, Klein let him read Mrs. Winslow her rights. While she listened, she looked at me, silently accusing me of betrayal. Had she really expected that I wouldn’t tell Klein and Arnold of our conversation in the garage? Didn’t she realize that, civilian or not, I still worked for the police? And what was it she said that had tipped Klein to her as the killer?

We found the gun in a shoebox in the front bedroom closet, a common enough place to hide one. As Arnold and I continued to look for additional evidence or any other weapons, Klein went through the papers he found on a desk in a first floor office.

During our search Mrs. Winslow sat on the living room sofa, kept company by the Baltimore County officers. Other than indicating that she had understood her rights and did not want an attorney, she had said nothing to anyone.

In the basement Arnold and I found a pair of women’s shoes that had been left on the workbench. They had probably been left there to be cleaned. The dirt on the sides and bottoms looked as if it would match the soil samples I’d recovered from the clearing where Winslow had been found. More of that same dirt would probably turn up when I

vacuumed the van in the driveway.

Klein was in the living room when we came up from the basement. He made a show of unloading the gun, removing the clip, ejecting the cartridge in the chamber, before putting it on a coffee table in front of Mrs. Winslow.

“Anything you want to tell us?”

She gave a sigh and sat back on the sofa. “I suppose it doesn’t matter now. It was as I told the young man,” she nodded toward me, “Harry just couldn’t handle things. He opened these businesses, made these deals, but just didn’t have the sense to see them through. I handled the money. I had to or we would’ve been broke.”

“Why did you kill him?” Klein asked softly.

She looked at him oddly.

“I just told you. He couldn’t handle things. Every sweet young thing he got involved with was always too young and not that sweet. There was always a payoff. And the movie deal. Instead of doing the time like he should have, Harry was going to name all his partners, except me of course.”

“And his other partners wouldn’t have liked that?” prompted Arnold.

“No, they wouldn’t have. They would have killed both Harry and me. So that night I left word for Harry to call me. When he did, I told him to meet me at the clearing.”

“Why the clearing?”

“Well, Mr. . . . Klein is it? That clearing was where Harry and I first—well, let’s just say it was a romantic spot for us. I told him I had a surprise for him. And I did, just not the kind he expected.”

“Once you got him alone in the clearing, what did you do?” Klein wanted to nail the confession down.

“I got him turned round and shot him in the back of the head.”

Arnold whispered to me, “No rush on doing the van, Grace.”

Actually, with the confession, the gun, and the shoes there was little need to do it, but we would anyway, just to be thorough.

“And why did you drive the van back instead of the Lincoln you came in?” The question startled not only Mrs. Winslow but Arnold and me.

“I don’t know how you found that out, Mr. Klein, but yes, Harry had the van that day. The Lincoln had been in the shop. I picked it up that afternoon.”

“And why did you leave it in the park?”

“It was Harry’s car. If I’d left the van and then reported him missing, it might have looked suspicious, his having the wrong car.”

Mrs. Winslow went back to headquarters with Arnold and Klein. I waited for the tow truck and followed it back. It wasn’t until lunch that I caught up with Klein.

“Arnold says I shouldn’t tell you, just to get back at you for all the times you called him Agatha.”

“You’ll tell me or I’ll lose the property receipt for the gun.”

“You were there, Matthew; you saw the same thing I did.”

“That bit is only entertaining when Holmes does it to Watson. All I saw was Mrs. Winslow get in her car and drive away.”

“And what didn’t you see?”

I was stumped, and he knew it. He paused, enjoying the moment. “You didn’t see her adjust the seat. She just got in the car and drove away without moving the seat up, which she would’ve had to do if her husband had last driven the car.”

“Which meant that she had left it in the park, not him.”

“Which puts her at the crime scene.”

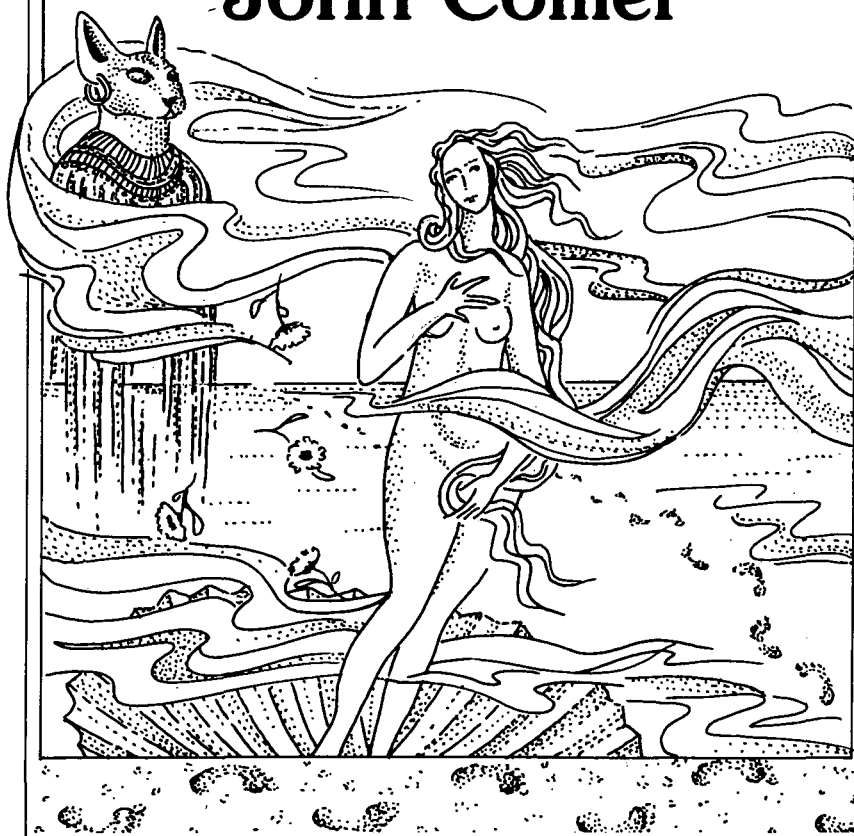
Doris Winslow’s confession held up. With that, the gun, and the soil from the clearing matching that from her shoes and van, the state’s attorney had an easy time convincing a jury of her guilt.

After the trial I had to tell Rich Arnold that I could no longer call him Agatha. I explained that since he needed his partner to solve his cases for him, he no longer deserved the name. He still isn’t sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Are You Too Late or Was I Too Early

John Collier



In the country I accept the normal and traditional routine, doing what every man does: rising early, eating when I should, turning up my coat collar when it rains. I see the reason for it, and shave at the same hour every morning.

Not so in town. When I live in town, I feel no impulse in the startling migrations of the rush hours. There is no tide, in any submarine cave, anywhere, that is not more to me than the inflow and outflow at the cold mouths of offices or the hot mouths of restaurants. I find no growth in time, no need for rain, no sense in sobriety, no joy in drinking, no point in paying, no plan in living. I exist, in this alien labyrinth, like an insect among men, or a man in a city of the ants.

I despise the inconsiderable superiority of the glum day over the starless night. My curtains are always drawn; I sleep when my eyes close, eat when I remember to, and read and smoke without ceasing, allowing my soul to leave my wastrel and untended carcase, and seldom do I question it when it returns.

My chambers are in the stoniest of the Inns of Court. I keep no servant here, for I mean always to go back to the country within the week, though sometimes I stay for months, or . . . I don't know how long. I supply myself with immense stocks of cigarettes, and such food as I happen to remember, so that I shall have no reason to return from the landscapes of Saturn or the undescribed gardens of Turgenev in order to go out into the streets.

My fingers are horribly blistered by the cigarettes that burn down between them while still I walk in the company of women with the heads of cats. Nothing seems strange to me when I wake from such reveries unless I part the curtains and look out into the Square. Sometimes I have to press my hands under my heart to resume the breathing that I have entirely forgotten.

I was constantly ambushed and defeated in I forget what journeys, or what loves, or where, by the fullness of a saucer in which a hand of mine failed to find room to crush out its cigarettes. Habit, which arranges these things, demanded some other receptacle. I rose, holding my thoughts as one holds a brimming glass, and was moved into the bathroom, drawn by the vague memory of a soap dish, which lay stranded like an empty shell on the empty beaches of a blank mind. But, swallowed by God knows what high-reaching wave, that shell was gone, and my reviving eyes, straying at first aimlessly, soon called me all back again, poor Crusoe! to regard on the cork mat a new, wet, glistening imprint of a naked foot.

It was not long before I assured myself that I was dry, dressed in my pajamas and slippers, and that I was not clean. Moreover, this foot, the prints of whose toes were as round as graded pearls, was neither

long, like that of a man, nor hideous, like that of a bear; it was not my own. It was that of a woman, a nymph, a new-risen Venus. I conceived that my wandering spirit had brought me back a companion from some diviner sea's edge, and some more fortunate shell.

I drank up this moist footprint with my hot eyes; it dried as I looked upon it. It was not the air took it, but I; I had it for my own. I examined it for days and nights, building, upon its graceful rotundities, arched insteps, ankles equally graceful, and calves proportionately round. I deduced knees, haunches, breasts, shoulders, arms, plump hands and pointed fingers, full neck, small head, and the long curl, like the curve when the wave breaks, of the green-gold hair.

Where there falls one footprint there must fall the next; I had no doubt I should soon be vouchsafed the dull gleam of her hair. For this, I at once became ravenous, and slunk restlessly from room to room.

I noticed, with half-unconscious approval, that even the neglected furnishings seemed responsive to the goddess, and stood clean and tidy as onlookers at a holiday. The carpet, as if she were Persephone instead of Venus, bloomed with new flowers beneath her invisible feet. The sun shone through the open window, and warm airs entered. At what moment had I swept back the curtains and extended this invitation to sun and air? Perhaps she had done so herself. It was, however, impossible to attend to such lovely trifles. I desired the gleam of her hair.

"Forgive me for having rejoiced in the pallor of the dead! Forgive me for having conversed with women who smelled like lions! Show me your hair!"

I was devoured by a cruel nostalgia for this being who was always with me. "Supposing," I thought, waking in my strangely fresh bed, "supposing she appeared terrifyingly in the darkness, white as marble, and as cold!" At that moment I felt an intermittent warmth on my cheek, and knew that she breathed beside me.

There was nothing to clasp but the empty air. For days I moved to and fro, my blood howling in me like a dog that bays at the moon. "There is nothing but the empty air."

I persuaded myself that this was nonsense. I had seen the trace of beauty, and felt the warmth of life. Gradually one sense after another would be refracted on this divine invisibility, till she stood outlined like a creature of crystal, and then as one of flesh and blood. As soon as I was well-persuaded, I saw her breath dimming upon a mirror.

I saw some flowers, which had appeared, part their petals as she bent her face to them. Hurrying there, I smelled, not the flowers, but her hair.

I threw myself down, and lay like a dog across the threshold, where,

once or twice in the day, I might feel the light breeze of her passing. I was aware of the movement of her body, or an eddy in the light where she moved; I was aware of the beating of her heart.

Sometimes, as if out of the corner of my eye, I saw, or thought I saw, not her bright flesh, but the light on her flesh, which vanished as I widened my eyes upon it.

I knew where she moved, and how she moved, but I was destroyed by a doubt, for she did not move towards me. Could there be some other existence, to which she was more responsive, some existence less tangible than her own? Or was she my unwilling prisoner here? Were those movements, of which I was not the object, the movements of one who longed only to escape?

It was impossible to tell. I thought I might know everything if only I could hear her voice. Perhaps she could hear mine.

I said to her, day and night, "Speak to me. Let me hear you. Tell me you have forgiven me. Tell me you are here forever. Tell me you are mine." Day and night I listened for her answer.

I waited in that unutterable silence, as one who, in a darkness equally profound, might await the arrival of a gleam of light from a star in whose existence he had good reason to believe. In the end, when I had ceased to hope or believe, I became aware of a sound—or something as near to a sound as the light on her cheek was near to the flesh of her cheek.

Now, living only in my eardrum, not moving, not breathing, I waited. This ghost of a sound increased: it passed through infinite gradations of rarity. It was like the sound in the second before the rain; it was like the fluttering of wings, the confused words of water; it was like words blown away in the wind; like words in a foreign tongue; it grew more distinct, closer.

Sometimes my hearing failed me, exactly as one's sight fails, dimmed suddenly by tears, when one is about to see the face one has always loved, after an ineffable absence. Or she would fall silent, and then I was like one who follows the sound of a brook, and loses it under the muffling trees, or under the ground. But I found it again, and each time it was clearer and stronger. I was able to distinguish words; I heard the word "love," I heard the word "happy."

I heard, in a full opening of the sense, the delicate intake of her breath, the very sound of the parting of her lips. She was about to speak again.

Each syllable was as clear as a bell. She said, "Oh, it's perfect. It's so quiet for Harry's work. Guess how we were lucky enough to get it! The previous tenant was found dead in his chair, and they actually say it's haunted."

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



In Linda Grant's sixth Catherine Saylor novel, **Vampire Bytes** (Scribner, \$22), the engaging private eye and her team are pulled into an eerie scenario wherein a computer game built around a cult of vampires has spilled over into real life. "Cult of Blood" is the name of one of the all-time most popular shareware games ever released. Written by a brilliant kid, the game is being used as the base storyline by groups of young people who are into live-action role-playing, or LARPing. Now the kid has disappeared, taking the source code for the revised version with him, and his investment partner wants both back. Solid writing and the unusual background of computer gaming and LARPing make this one a winner.

Canadian writer Rosemary Aubert has created a shockingly unconventional hero in **Free Reign** (Berkley, \$6.99). Ellis Portal was a powerful and wealthy Toronto judge before scandal lost him his career, his money, even his family. For years now he has lived the solitary life of a vagrant in the wilds that weave through the city. The discovery of a severed hand wearing a ring that Ellis recognizes will push him into an alliance with a young reporter—and back into a world more dangerous than that of a homeless bum. Aubert has provided a portrait of a man whose very way of life creates much of this novel's suspense. Portal has nothing but his life and, surprisingly, his dignity; the fear that he may lose either of them creates unbearable tension.

Carol O'Connell's exceptional Kathleen Mallory novels have earned her a large following. Now comes a breathtakingly ambitious suspense novel that should be required reading for admirers of Ruth Rendell and Minette Walters. It is three days before Christmas and two ten-year-old students from the local academy have disappeared. It has been fifteen years since the last time, when policeman Rouge Kendall's twin was murdered, and a priest sits in jail convicted of that

death. But another former classmate of Rouge's, forensic psychologist Ali Cray, believes that this kidnapping is part of a longtime pattern: one child is the bait, the **Judas Child** (Putnam, \$24.95), and she will die immediately. The other will live only until Christmas. The premise is familiar here; it is the only thing in the book that proves to be so. O'Connell employs strikingly original characters and a brilliant twist in the telling of this mesmerizing tale.

Kathy Reichs' **Déjà Dead** (Pocket, \$6.99) spent weeks on the best-seller lists in hardcover, primarily due to its comparison with the popular books by Patricia Cornwell. Like her protagonist, Dr. Temperance Brennan, Reichs is a forensic anthropologist with connections to both North Carolina and Quebec; she has also created a strong and compelling character in Tempe, a scientist whose dogged professionalism threatens a serial killer and turns his attention to her.

Bernard Bastable (also known as Robert Barnard) has penned a quietly compelling little novel—**A Mansion and Its Murder** (Carroll & Graf, \$22)—that proves to be a wonderful character study as well as a vivid portrait of a lost era. Sarah Jane Fearing was born a poor little rich girl, only child of the mogul of a banking dynasty. She was reared by her distant father at Blakemere, a huge country estate, and the only bright spot in her existence was her charming, loving Uncle Frank. Frank was the family's black sheep, the wanderer and adventurer; his doting niece chronicles his downfall to debts and finally his disastrous marriage to an heiress. Sarah is bright and inquisitive, and she believes she knows most of the events leading up to the fateful night when Frank disappeared from Blakemere (and her life) forever. She doesn't, but she surely will by the book's end.

Very different in flavor but similar in intent is Tom Savage's **The Inheritance** (Dutton, \$23.95), which its author presents as a tribute to his favorite gothic authors. Certainly, many of the standard elements are here. Holly Smith is a middle-class girl who suddenly becomes an heiress. She takes up residence in the family home, an old, luxurious Connecticut mansion. In the house are assorted relatives and domestics and at least one enemy; indeed, the novel opens with a murder. Savage, however, has "updated" the formula with a twist that will please some readers and probably annoy others.

Jerrilyn Farmer's **Sympathy for the Devil** (Avon, \$5.99) introduces sprightly Madeline Bean, who together with her partner bills herself as "Caterer to the Stars." Unfortunately, her outlandish Halloween extravaganza for a loathsome, powerful Hollywood producer ends in a fatality—by poison. Nor does it help her firm's reputation when her partner is arrested for the deed. This is lightweight fare, perfect for snacking between heavier crime fiction tomes.

THE STORY THAT WON

The April Mysterious Photograph contest was won by R. Stewart of Walnut Creek, California. Honorable mentions go to Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Victor P. Dufault of Noank, Connecticut; Marjorie Em of Highland, Indiana; Dick Saxe of To-



ledo, Ohio; Janet Hayward Burnham of Bethel, Vermont; Jack E. Romig of Largo, Florida; Saralyn Romanishan of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Jan Streilein of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; and Carmen G. Allen of Bottineau, North Dakota.

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

MAN ON THE ROLLER COASTER by R. Stewart

McGraw is a spiritual cop, even carries a pocket Bible. When he has me, his rookie pard, drive by the shut-down amusement park for the umpteenth time, I quiz: "What's up, Mac?"

"It's my damn angel, Mazie," he grumbles. "Keeps telling me we might crack the L'Mour jewel heist here."

Half a million in rubies and ice has recently been nipped from the Pacific Heights mansion of Lily L'Mour, our local stage goddess. Algie Hipps, a paroled cat burglar, is the prime suspect, but so far he's squeaky clean.

"Algie could have stashed the loot up in that contraption till the heat's off," says Mac, then snorts. "Aw, what the hell do angels know about jewel heists? Let's go!"

"Not so fast, Mac." Then I lie on impulse. "I just saw a man up there!"

"Baloney!"

"You calling your angel a liar?"

That does it. "Okay, stop!" says Mac. "I'll sneak up and take a look. You wait as backup."

I wait nervously, and in fifteen minutes here comes Mac and damned if he ain't leading a cuffed Algie Hipps. I help put him in the cruiser's pen. "Good work, Mac!" I greet him. "You get the baubles?" Mac nods and tosses me a sack of gems.

"I lied about seeing a man up there on the roller coaster, Mac," I confess contritely on the drive to the station.

"I know," Mac shrugs. "I got an angel, remember?"

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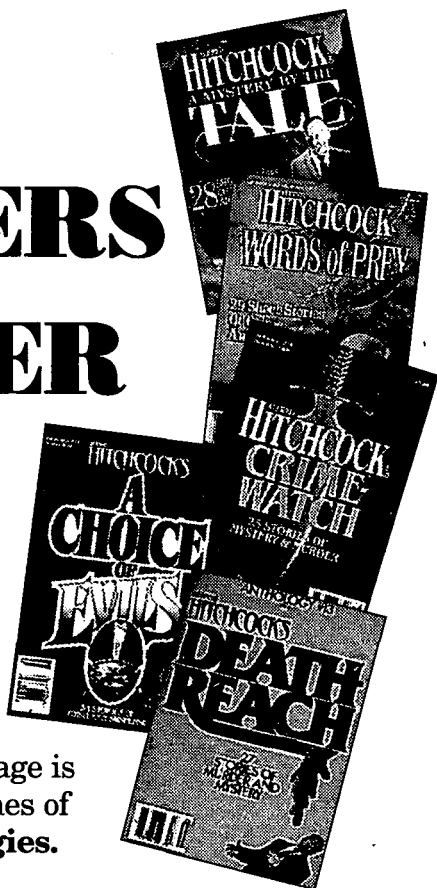
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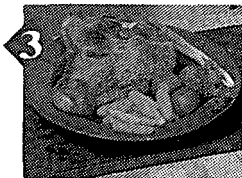
Wonder Cooker™ works with ordinary cookware to heat food evenly and quickly, all while retaining natural juices and flavors.



1
Frozen solid



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Cover & cook



3
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by Helen Taub

Like many busy families we often use frozen foods, but oh how I hate the job of defrosting! The microwave is either too much or too little, and defrosting on the countertop leaves me concerned about bacteria.

My neighbor, Maryann, bought a Wonder Cooker for her diet—said it saved oodles of calories because it cooked without butter or oil and, incidentally, it cooked frozen foods without defrosting! That convinced me.

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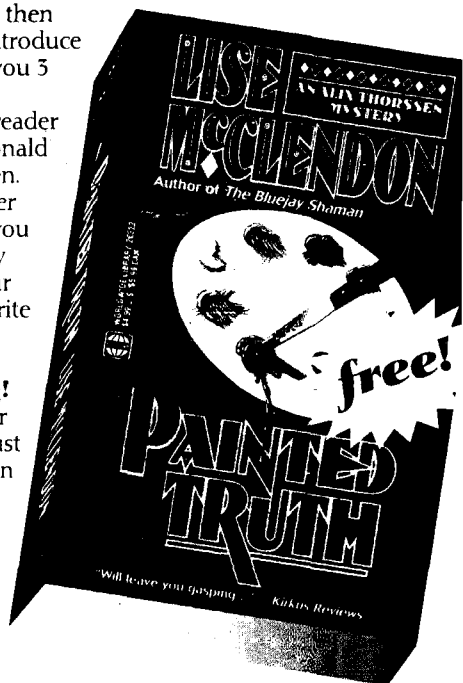
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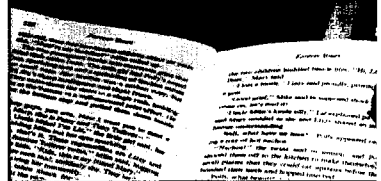
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